Homecoming Queens:
Gay Suburban Narratives in British and American Film and Fiction

Martin Dines

This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University for the degree of PhD in English Literature.

Kingston University
June 2006

Abstract

Since the early 1980s, an increasing number of British and American stories in print and on screen have offered detailed fictional and autobiographical accounts of the suburban experiences of gay men. The aim of this thesis is to examine these texts, and to assess the position that suburbia holds in the gay imaginary. In so doing, this study will make a significant contribution to knowledge with regards to the interactions of sexual identity, space and narrative. Specifically, it will develop an understanding of the characteristics, functions and implications of cultural representations of suburban homosexualities, which, whilst widespread, have hitherto drawn only minimal critical attention.

The thesis identifies and evaluates the various strategies with which gay narratives negotiate suburbia. Each strategy is considered as constituting a particular conceptualization of gay subculture, and as articulating certain forms of engagement with mainstream society. The thesis firstly examines texts which represent adolescent homosexuality in suburban settings through an analysis of the narrative trajectories of, and the characterization of suburbia in, conventional American coming-out novels, recent popular British gay films and American 'New Narrative' writing. Far from simply showing the need for homosexual youth to escape the suburbs, these texts extend the boundaries of gay identity, by recuperating early, disavowed experiences as gay. They also demonstrate the opportunities that such environments hold for gay men: suburbs appear to offer the possibility of greater freedom and authenticity, or constitute places where reconciliation with heterosexual society can be staged.

Secondly, the thesis considers representations of adult gay men visiting and living in suburbia. I investigate the 'return' to the suburbs from the perspective of conservative gay critics and writers based in the United States and of radical British and American writers. I show that their respective aims of demonstrating the desirability of an assimilated, 'ordinary' gay suburban life, and of disrupting, or 'queering', heterosexual space, are unrealizable. A variety of fictional texts demonstrate that a more practicable and felicitous tactic is to revisit and reclaim suburban sites with gay subcultural significance.

Contents

List of Illustrations

Acknowledgements

Introduction
The Straightest Space Imaginable?

From the perspective of gay and lesbian people, suburbia – the expansive, predominantly residential environs of towns and cities – is seemingly the least suitable and least desirable of all habitats. With a long-established reputation for hostility towards any kind of deviation from its principle unit of organization, the heterosexual family home, suburbia appears to be the straightest space imaginable. Andy Medhurst's excoriating summation is typical of the view that homosexuality and suburbia are utterly antithetical:

> It is perhaps sexual dissidents who are the most rigorously 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 [...] Every sociological study of the suburbs, every media text depicting them, unerringly concurs on this point, so it's little surprise that suburban homosexuals either flee such smothering familialism for the centres of cities [...] or keep fearfully quiet about their sexual lives.[1]

As Medhurst suggests, it is not only homosexuals who have suffered in the suburbs. In Western anglophone cultures, whilst suburbs have long represented a dream of a safe, quasi-rural, prosperous and democratic community, they have also become synonymous with a conformity that is by turns bland, suffocating and vicious. For at least a century, innumerable incarnations of suburbia in both popular and literary texts as well as sociological works characterize it as a dystopian space, or else a failed or flawed utopia. The distance between the ideal and the lived experience of the suburbs has often been measured by their many exclusions, especially along lines of class and race. For much of the twentieth century, for instance, the suburbs of American and English cities have been conceived as bastions of a white middle class that has jealously guarded its privileges.[2]

Given such a history, it is perhaps overly bold to claim that, of all people, it is homosexuals who are the 'most rigorously policed' in the suburbs. It is clear, though, that

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[1] Andy Medhurst, 'Negotiating the Gnome Zone: Versions of Suburbia in British Popular Culture', in *Visions of Suburbia*, ed. Roger Silverstone (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 240-68 (p. 266).

[2] The sociological concept of 'white flight', first used to describe the processes of racial accession in northern cities in the United States, whereby increasing numbers of black migrants and poor European immigrants settling in urban centres prompted the dispersal of longer-established and wealthier whites to newly-built suburbs, still strongly influences the way in which American and English cities are conceived. See Mark Clapson, *Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the USA* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), pp. 79-105. For an excellent and extensive study of literary representations of white flight, see Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

to insist, as Medhurst does, upon the especial marginalization of sexual dissidents is to accept the centrality of the heterosexual family to the suburban project. Such an assumption is not unreasonable: the 'hegemony of heterosexuality' is seemingly enshrined in the very design of suburban architecture, from the organization of the interior of the family home, with its hierarchy of space encouraging normative familial relationships (with the master bedroom, or 'Bedroom 1', dominating a series of smaller compartmentalized spaces which promise division and intrusion as much as they do privacy),[3] to the layout of the streetscape (with houses typically facing each other in the ubiquitous cul-de-sac) which facilitates the surveillance of any deviant activity, in particular, the monitoring of visitors. Moreover, what is particularly difficult about suburbia for homosexuals, as opposed to other marginalized groups, is that they are born into and grow up in a milieu that is hostile to their very presence. If, by contrast, a family is ill-treated on the basis of being from a racial minority, then at least family members have each other for support. Few such opportunities are available for lesbians and gay men; as Medhurst suggests, if they do not leave, they remain isolated and fearful.

Homosexuality and the City

If suburbs are indeed anathema to homosexuality, then it is roundly agreed that the city is the place one must get to if one is lesbian or gay. Numerous commentators from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, geography, architecture and history, emphasize the reciprocal centrality of the city to the development of homosexual subcultures. In his extensive overview of historical studies which examine the relationship between homosexuality and urbanity, Robert Aldrich boldly argues that the association has existed 'since the time of ancient Athens and the Biblical Sodom and Gomorrah': generally, the constitution of cities throughout history and in most geographical and cultural contexts has fostered homosexual networks and modes of expression.[4] The reasons, writes Aldrich, 'are not difficult to discern': 'Cities offered a larger selection of partners than smaller towns or villages' and an opportunity to escape 'traditional' forms of life; also, 'crowds provided

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[3] For more gay and lesbian studies of domestic space, see for example Lynda Johnston and Gill Valentine, 'Wherever I Lay My Girlfriend, That's My Home: The Performance of and Surveillance of Lesbian Identities in Domestic Environments', in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 99-113, and David Bell, 'Insignificant Others: Lesbian and Gay Geographies', *Area*, 23 (1991), 323-9.

[4] Robert Aldrich, 'Homosexuality and the City: An Historical Overview', *Urban Studies*, 41 (2004), 1719-1737 (p. 1719).

anonymity and, where homosexual acts remained illegal, a measure of safety.'[5] In spite of the seemingly inherent advantages of cities, Aldrich is well aware of the many discontinuities of homosexual experience throughout history and across cultures. He rightly suggests that a present-day gay westerner transported through time and space to any of the cities of the classical era would likely be disorientated by the absence of a 'ghetto', or for that matter, a distinct, singular homosexual 'identity'. Instead, 'sexual meeting spots were public gathering spaces; most positions of homosexual fornication were not legally punishable; [...] what would now be seen as "homosexual" sex was embedded in a nexus of condoned conduct and representations inseparable from the city.'[6]

Similarly, in his historical study of homosexuality in New York City, George Chauncey shows that even as late as the mid-twentieth century, despite the proliferation of sites associated with homosexual interaction, same-sex practice, particularly amongst working-class cultures, was not necessarily understood in terms of the homosexual-heterosexual binary that predominates today. Rather, homosexually active individuals self-identified, and were characterized by others, in more complex ways, though principally along lines of class and gender. For example, those who persistently acted effeminately were designated 'faeries', masculine-acting working-class men open, under certain conditions, to prostituting themselves were referred to as 'roughs' or 'punks', and their homosexually identified middle-class clients, 'queers'.[7]

One thing that liberationist and earlier class- and gender-based formations of same-sex desire have in common, though, is their strong association with the metropolis. Indeed, the rise of the industrial city has been acknowledged as the most important socioeconomic process facilitating the emergence of distinctly homosexual identities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As John D'Emilio has argued, the decisive shift from a household to a predominantly urban free-labour economy enabled the development of sexual identities. With the consequent loosening of family ties and the growth of anonymous cities, 'affection, intimate relationships, and sexuality moved increasingly into the realm of individual choice, seemingly disconnected from how one organized the production of goods

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[5] Ibid., p. 1721.
[6] Ibid., p. 1723.
[7] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Urban World* (New York: Basic, 1994), pp. 65-98.

necessary for survival.'[8] Others, concentrating on urban cruising as a principle form of homosexual interaction, have similarly theorized homosexuality as a product of the culture of modernity. Henning Bech, for one, insists that homosexuality is 'essentially urban', focusing particularly on how street cruising comprises 'a combination of gazes and movements which at gay bars take place in an enclosure and finds its proper territory out in the city.' Indeed, for Bech, modern urbanity necessitates a sexualized mode of interaction: in an appropriately breathless manner, he explains that the city stimulates through a 'special blend of closeness and distance, surface and gaze, freedom and danger.' He continues:

> Others are defenceless vis-à-vis your gaze and you yourself are on display to theirs; you come so close to them you can almost touch them, yet ought not to: a distance that incites you to overstep yet still maintain it; surfaces intercept gazes and turn into signals, and the flickering vibrates; the crowd generates feelings of supply and possibilities; the anonymity and the absence of immediate social control amplifies the feeling, and the risk of nevertheless being monitored and uncovered increases the tension.[9]

Mark Turner offers more of an historical explanation for the emergence of cruising. Turner argues that in part due to the development of new technologies in the nineteenth century, which 'seemed to privilege vision over other sensory experiences', urban modernity 'has most frequently been understood through vision'. A predominantly visual strategy, cruising offers a means by which the modern city can be successfully 'read': 'an urban world defined increasingly by density of population – of people who remain essentially anonymous and who encounter others mostly as strangers – required new ways of understanding the fleeting moments of modernity.'[10] According to Turner, the pleasures generated by cruising, in particular the flashes of self-recognition produced through momentary contact, serve to modify the experience of estrangement that supposedly characterizes life in the modern city.

Despite the suburbs having developed in tandem with the modern city, none of the above analyses of the relationship between homosexuality and urbanity offer any significant consideration of suburban geographies. Bech considers suburban cruising a

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[8] John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 11.

[9] Henning Bech, *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity*, trans. Teresa Mesquit and Tim Davies (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 118.

[10] Mark Turner, *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* (London: Reaktion, 2003), p. 57.

possibility only as an accidental outcome of the imbricated processes of gazing and movement that govern sexual interaction within the city: it is possible to become so engrossed in this flux that almost without noticing, the cruising subject can, for example, 'end up out in Chiswick.'[11] In a footnote, Aldrich lists a variety of non-urban sites that have 'all figured among gay fantasies'. His final and only suburban entry, 'industrial suburbs and working-class blokes', suggests that somehow residential suburbs and middle-class commuters have minimal appeal.[12] Presumably, suburban life is to be interpreted not only as unsexily feminine, but as the very antithesis of the experience of modernity; suburbia constitutes a largely privatized, domestic realm, as opposed to the relentlessly public environment of the city, and is a place that lacks crowds, an extensive street life, a network of meeting places or any significant nocturnal activity. Having so little to do with homosexuality, it seems the suburbs can be ignored entirely.

The city has not only structured the lived experience of a vast number of people who seek sexual contact with members of their own sex; it also, perhaps unsurprisingly, looms large in the cultural production of the same group. The metropolises of the world have for long dominated a putative 'gay imaginary'. Judith Halberstam suggests that most homosexual literary figures of the last hundred years or so inescapably invoke a particular urban context:

> Just a quick glance at some of the most influential high-culture texts of queer urban life would reveal gay guidebooks to Oscar Wilde's London, Jean Genet's Paris, Christopher Isherwood's Berlin, E. M. Forster's Florence, Thomas Mann's Venice, Edmund White's New York, John Rechy's Los Angeles, Allen Ginsberg's San Francisco, and so on. Canonized literary production by Euro-American lesbian writers like Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes, Jeanette Winterson and Gertrude Stein similarly focuses, although less obsessively, on urban locations like Paris, London and New York.[13]

Usefully, Aldrich notes not only how the 'persistence of a vernacular linkage' between homosexuality and the city has been repeatedly alluded to in the titles of novels – Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948); John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963); Armistead Maupin's multivolume *Tales of the City* (1978-89) – but also that such texts illustrate the changing face of homosexual subcultures. Whereas Vidal's and Rechy's novels access

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[11] Bech, *When Men Meet*, p.106.

[12] Aldrich, 'Homosexuality and the City', p. 1733n.

[13] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

hidden homosexual underworlds, Maupin's chronicle an altogether more open milieu, featuring 'the coming-out of small-town boys come to enjoy the Bay City in an ebullient period of gay liberation to the physical and emotional trauma of AIDS.'[14]

This trope of arrival, charting the provincial characters' simultaneous discovery of their own sexuality and their inception into an urban homosexual community, predominates in gay and lesbian fiction published between the early 1960s and the late 1980s, when AIDS narratives (by male writers) had become increasingly abundant. Examples can be found in both 'popular' and 'literary' cultural products. From the US, for instance, there is Beebo Brinker, the eponymous heroine of the 1960s lesbian pulp series by Anne Bannon. Brinker's transformation from Midwestern farm girl, with 'hayseed still showing', to a central player in the Greenwich Village lesbian scene is a journey of self-realization. Previously, her only concept of herself was her 'difference' from her female peers back home; it is only in central New York where she is able to discover herself through an identification with other metropolitan lesbians. The cover of the first edition captures her arrival – when she is on the cusp of both being discovered and of her own self-discovery – standing nervously under a New York City street lamp, still encumbered with luggage after her flight from the provinces.[15]

Narratives of arrival also feature prominently in two British (and comparatively literary) novels published in the 1980s. Neil Bartlett's *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* describes the society of a London gay bar in the 1960s. Bartlett's novel appears entirely conscious of the centrality of narratives of arrival within gay subculture; indeed, as part of his ritualized investiture into the life of 'The Bar' the young protagonist is required to dress up and perform numerous gay roles, one notably being that of the naive provincial man.[16] Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming Pool Library* centres on Soho as a cosmopolitan gay haven. Hollinghurst emphasizes the similarities between Soho in the 1920s and the 1980s: in both eras, opportunities for sexual contact between men of different class and racial backgrounds abounded. Soho is perceived as an exotic space – 'All along by the Café Royal people were swarming around and there was a mood (which was quite oriental) of clamour and grime with underneath it a great passive summery calm. Life in England is so

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[14] Ibid., p. 1720.
[15] Ann Bannon, *Beebo Brinker* (New York: Fawcett, 1962).
[16] Neil Bartlett, *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990).

little of the streets it was delicious to loiter'.[17] Yet, paradoxically, the area's foreignness renders Soho invitingly homely; as Frank Mort describes, gay men commonly identified Soho as 'home', particularly during the inter-war period: 'Many testified to the magnetic attraction of the district, producing its own sense of symbolic "homecoming" or "belonging."'[18]

Suburbia and Gay Lives

There is, then, a great wealth of cultural and critical material demonstrating a profound link between same-sex desire and urbanity. There also exists, however, an extensive and growing volume of cultural material – film, published fiction, autobiography – that considers gay experiences of the suburbs. As my thesis title suggests, 'homecoming' is no longer only about discovering and settling in the city; gay cultural producers are increasingly turning their attention to the suburbs in order to assess the opportunities such environments offer and to examine the personal and gay cultural investments in these sites. Yet, as the above commentators have demonstrated, suburban homosexualities are typically either overlooked or presumed unviable. What is required, then, and what this thesis aims to provide, is an analysis of the many and varied representations of gay suburban experience.

Actually, critical interest in suburban homosexuality has started to gather momentum recently. Medhurst's contention, that 'every sociological study of the suburbs, every media text depicting them' shows them to be places hostile to gay people, is on both counts out of date. There are numerous recent sociological studies, at least from the United States, which show that it is indeed possible to be both a suburban and a happy homosexual.[19] The most extensive to date is the book-length study *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs*, wherein Wayne H. Brekhus identifies two separate strategies for managing gay identity in the suburbs. The first, that of the 'chameleon', is structured around commuting between gay subcultural sites in cities and a more diurnal, mainstream lifestyle in the suburbs. The approach of the 'centaur', on the other hand, is to integrate the gay and suburban elements of his life that others consider mutually exclusive; the gay centaur is the most likely to use

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[17] Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), pp. 151-2.
[18] Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 166.
[19] E.g. Rosalyn Baxendall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic, 2001), p. 223; Ken Kirkey and Ann Forsyth, 'Men in the Valley: Gay Male Life on the Suburban-Rural Fringe', *Journal of Rural Studies* 17 (2001), 421-41.

that familiar phrase 'being gay is just part of who I am'.[20] Importantly, neither the chameleon nor the centaur leads closeted, fearful lives. Moreover, not only does Brekhus elucidate two distinct kinds of successful gay suburbanite, he finds them sufficiently coherent and in evidence to extend the same frameworks of identity management to other groups, and in the latter half of his study he examines a whole range, from Christian and S&M commuters to Italian-American and soccer-mom integrators. Contradicting Medhurst's assertions, Brekhus's study demonstrates that gay suburbanites have, in a very short space of time, gone from being considered off-limits by sociologists to having become principal models with which to study all manner of heterosexual suburban identities.[21]

Suburban homosexuality has not only received more attention from scholars recently. Life outside the urban centres has also become an increasingly frequent topic for discussion in the American gay press. Articles which investigate gay suburban lives certainly do not ignore some of the less pleasant experiences lesbians and gay men have endured – isolation, homophobic abuse – but these aspects are usually balanced by the many benefits, for instance, the sense of space and peace, the relatively low cost of living, and in particular the cheapness of housing stock (few gay suburbanites interviewed fail to mention with satisfaction the price they paid for their home, a figure which is invariably dwarfed by the most recent valuation of their property). More importantly perhaps, the diffusion of lesbians and gay men out of the cities and into the suburbs is usually interpreted as a politically significant phenomenon which at last renders credible the 1970s liberation mantra 'we are everywhere'. The willingness to depart from the safety of the urban centres is a measure of a new-found optimism and confidence; Charles Yoo suggests that 'it's the determination to test tolerance in places where a thriving gay culture never existed that drives [gay men and lesbians] to seek new frontiers'.[22] Moreover, there is a recognition that the struggle for gay rights has shifted its focus from the city to the suburbs and beyond. G. Bruce Smith, for example, details several instances where the continued harassment of gays living in suburban and rural locations has led to vigorous campaigning on their behalf by organizations seeking to overturn homophobic legislation at national and state level. Smith

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[20] Wayne K. Brekhus, *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs: Gay Suburbia and the Grammar of Social Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
[21] Probably the earliest study is Frederick R. Lynch's examination of gay men living in suburban Los Angeles in the 1980s, 'Nonghetto Gays: An Ethnography of Suburban Homosexuals', in *Gay Culture in America: Essays in the Field*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1992), pp. 165-202.
[22] Charles Yoo, 'Urban Renewal', *Advocate*, 20 June 2000, 86-8 (p. 86).

concludes that 'many gay community leaders believe that it is the heartland queers – an increasing number of whom face hate and violence from middle-America straights – who are at the forefront of the gay rights movement in this country.'[23]

Suburban gays are by no means always greeted with hostility by their straight neighbours; indeed, many heterosexual residents seemingly enjoy the frisson of difference that gay men in particular apparently induce. For instance, in her lighthearted account of the queering of American culture, Cathy Crimmins declares that as a child she often wondered what made her neighbourhood 'so fabulous, so different from other rural or suburban environments.' In retrospect she realizes that 'it was the steady presence of gay men that set it apart.'[24] The shaking up of a blandly suburban America by gay men is one of Crimmins's prominent themes and is the clearly readable subtext of the original cover of *How Homosexuals Saved Civilization*, which shows an inverted black-and-white photo of a 1950s family looking up at their new suburban home. Crimmins wants to show that contemporary suburban families have been won round by the social and economic benefits of having homosexuals in their midst. For example the anxieties of one homebuyer are only finally allayed after he meets his future neighbours, 'a gay male couple gutting the structure next door, with plans for a total renovation. "We're okay now"' he declares, '"I know the neighborhood will improve. There are gay guys here."'[25] Ironically then, it is gay men who have helped to preserve or otherwise revive something of the original suburban dream, the promise of a safe and prosperous middle-class community on the fringes of the city. Indeed, the increasing tendency of gays to pioneer 'new frontiers' – celebrated by numerous commentators as an act of political bravery – has had perhaps unforeseen material and social consequences, often initiating a process of gentrification.[26] The emergent discourse of gays populating the suburbs is, then, predominantly a middle-class one; it may be increasingly appropriate to declare 'we are everywhere' with confidence, but that 'we' does not necessarily constitute all of 'us'. Certainly there are reasons to be buoyed by the picture

[23] G. Bruce Smith, 'From the Mecca to the Burbs', *Frontiers*, 29 November 1996, 59-64 (p. 59).

[24] Cathy E. Crimmins, *How Homosexuality Saved Civilization: The True and Heroic Story of How Gay Men Shaped the Modern World* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2005), p. xiv.

[25] Ibid., p. 42.

[26] Gay gentrification is hardly a new phenomenon, though earlier studies examined its impact on the urban centres of San Francisco, New Orleans and elsewhere. See Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 138-170, and Lawrence Knopp, 'Gentrification and Gay Neighborhood Formation in New Orleans: A Case Study', in *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community and Lesbian and Gay Life*, ed. Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 45-63.

presented by the likes of Crimmins: it shows straight and gay people getting along together better and everybody having more fun all round. However, arguably the basis by which homosexuality can be appreciated by straight society is too narrowly defined: generally, it must be both bourgeois and male (as if lesbians were not equally handy about the home); further, gay men are required to be both entertaining and house-proud.

In Britain also, lesbians and gay men are reckoned to be choosing to live in suburbs, and are doing so more openly as these places become more tolerant of homosexuality, a change which corresponds with the advance of more accepting attitudes across society generally. But gays are attracted to suburbs for manifold reasons, not least because suburbs are varied places. Arguably, though, the reasons for moving to a suburb are the same for gay people as they are for everybody else: suburbs are usually perceived to be cleaner, safer (particularly for those with children), quieter, more convenient and, again, more affordable. Potentially, then, the suburbanization of homosexuality demonstrates how gayness has become entirely unremarkable. Indeed, Sasha Roseneil perceives a destabilization of modern categories of homosexual and heterosexual:

> As more and more lesbians and gay men are having children, and living in co-residential couple relationships for which they seek legal and social recognition – in other words becoming 'straighter' – more and more heterosexuals are living lives that used to be considered distinctively lesbian/gay, in prioritising the centrality of friendship, de-prioritising the couple relationship, and having sexual encounters driven by a pleasure ethic.[27]

The Challenges of Contesting 'Gay' and 'Suburbia'

Despite the suggestions by sociologists and other commentators that gay suburbanites are increasingly living in the manner of everyone else whilst simultaneously inspiring others to live differently, many of the cultural associations of homosexuality on the one hand and the suburbs on the other have been notably static. Both 'gay' and 'suburbia' remain decidedly resilient categories, each harbouring a relatively narrow range of usually pejorative connotations that have proven resistant to change. Indeed, if anything, frequently it seems that the signification of both terms has been all but evacuated; what remains is a residual negativity. For instance, in contemporary British school playgrounds, undoubtedly crucial forums for the production and dissemination of cultural attitudes, the accusation 'gay' is

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[27] Quoted in Julie Bindell, 'Location, Location, Orientation', *Guardian*, 27 May 2004, http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,3605,1177708,00.html [accessed 17 June 2004].

increasingly less an insinuation of sexuality than a statement of inferiority. So, despite the continued contestation of negative stereotypes in gay and lesbian criticism and politics, it seems that the 1970s liberation slogan 'gay is good' has largely failed to embed itself. The appropriation of 'positive images' is made all the more difficult by the fact that, for decades, homosexuals have engaged in what Michel Foucault terms a 'reverse discourse', whereby 'homosexuality began to speak in [sic] its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturality" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary by which it was [...] disqualified'.[28] It is hardly surprising, therefore, that activists and cultural producers in the 1970s – and even after – found it difficult to overturn ideas about, for example, the *essential* effeminacy of homosexual men and mannishness of lesbians, when many homosexuals had been articulating such concepts for a considerable time both in order to acquire a degree of legitimacy and as a way of organizing their subcultures. The persistent challenge, then, remains how best to combat prejudiced and limiting images of gay and lesbian people whilst producing representations that are *still recognizably* gay or lesbian. Many commentators continue to criticize the apparent narrowness of 'gay', particularly in its allegedly apolitical and thoroughly commercialized contemporary state; Mark Simpson lambastes the corruption of the original liberationist vision: 'Nowadays, gay is *goods*.'[29] Several of these critics have in response elected to reject 'gay' rather than develop it. As Alan Sinfield remarks, however, such a strategy only perpetuates the problem. For instance, Toby Manning and other contributors to the collection *Anti-Gay* castigate 'the mindless uniformity of gay culture'. Manning insists gay subculture 'has a lot to learn from such writers as Genet, Burroughs, Tennessee Williams and Dennis Cooper' but, Sinfield responds, 'since they are "transgressive" they are, by definition, not gay.'[30]

A comparable case can be made for the burgeoning field of suburban studies. Many scholars have complained that popular notions of the suburbs remain stubbornly outdated. Vesna Goldsworthy argues that in England, 'the suburbs of our imagination seem forever stuck in the 1970s';[31] they owe too much to a handful of suburban-located situation comedies. It is unsurprising that people so often deny that they live in a suburb even when

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[28] Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume One*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998 [1978]), p. 101.

[29] *Anti-Gay*, ed. Mark Simpson (London: Freedom Editions, 1996), p. xiv.

[30] Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), p. 15.

[31] Vesna Goldsworthy, 'The Love that Dare Not Speak Its Name: Englishness and Suburbia', in *The Revision of Englishness*, ed. David Rogers and John McLeod (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 95-106 (p. 104).

the area in which they reside conforms to every planner's definition of one. Demographically if not physically these environments are changed places since programmes such as *The Good Life* were first aired;[32] audiences are increasingly less likely to recognize their own habitat in these outmoded representations of wholly white middle-class suburban populations. One of the main reasons for the persistence of these inaccurate portrayals is that, unlike in the rest of Europe, 'suburbia' in England is less a geographical term than a metaphorical one, having become 'too enmeshed in class and aspiration'.[33] Yet, as ever, suburbs paradoxically remain the most desirable of habitats; consequently (and rather ironically, given the current context), Goldsworthy characterises the English attitude to suburbia as 'the love that dare not speak its name': 'We want to live there but don't acknowledge it, because of its negative image.'[34]

In the United States, contemporary representations of the suburbs tend also to evoke earlier decades, particularly the post-war years which saw the greatest surge of suburbanization in American history. In *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville*, both released in 1998, modern-day suburban communities are presented as or compared to those depicted in 1950s situation comedies such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*.[35] Both films attempt to critique suburban life as inauthentic and coercive. In *The Truman Show*, the protagonist Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) gradually discovers that his seemingly perfect suburban home environment is not all that it seems; in fact it is a massive television set for a 'reality' show in which every moment of his life is recorded and then broadcast to millions of viewers worldwide. The routines and rhythms of Burbank's town appear regimented because they are so, organized with clockwork precision by the omniscient and omnipotent director; the heartiness of his neighbours seems vapid because their intent is purely sedative. Burbank ultimately – and not without some struggle – breaks out of and

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[32] Set in haute-suburban Surbiton, *The Good Life* (BBC, 1975-8) was one of Britain's most successful situation comedies.

[33] Two Italian artists, whose own work explores their diffident relationship with their Sicilian hometown, found my focus on the suburbs puzzling; I found myself having to explain to them a whole series of connotative associations that in Britain are taken for granted. It is quite understandable, then, that Italian gay cultural producers have attempted to manipulate other, more potent symbols of Italian familial heterosexuality. The film director Ferzan Ozpetek, for instance, repeatedly appropriates the symbolics of the family meal to articulate an LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered) subcultural presence (see in particular *Le Fate Ignoranti* (The Ignorant Faeries), Parasol Peccadillo, 2001).

[34] Tom Geoghegan, 'Suburbia Fights Back', *BBC News Magazine*, last updated 26 April 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4483097.stm [accessed 10 October 2005].

[35] *The Truman Show*, dir. Peter Weir, Paramount, 1998; *Pleasantville*, dir. Gary Ross, New Line, 1998; *Father Knows Best*, CBS, 1954-5 and 1958-63; NBC, 1955-8; ABC, 1962; *Leave It to Beaver*, CBS, 1957-8; ABC, 1958-63.

flees his all-too-womblike hometown to discover freedom, in what is arguably a delayed rites-of-passage sequence with the adult, as opposed to adolescent, Burbank escaping the oppressive and artificial confines of suburbia. *Pleasantville* explores similar thematic territory, with brother and sister David and Jennifer's discovery of a monochrome, fifties-style suburban community through their television set-cum-time machine. The pair succeed in enlivening the circumscribed lives of the inhabitants of Pleasantville (literally bringing colour into their black-and-white world), though are met with hostility by some of the town's establishment who employ increasingly authoritarian measures – even book burnings – to compel the population to return to placid conformity.

For Robert Beuka these films demonstrate how suburbia has become entirely 'overdetermined': in both *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville*, the suburb is 'depicted less as a lived place than as a signifier of certain co-optive, even totalitarian impulses that lurk beneath the fabric of centrist, middle-class American culture.'[36] Not only, then, do these narratives engage only minimally with people's experiences of suburban life, they imply that there have been no subtler or more balanced interpretations of the environment since the 1950s, a suggestion reinforced by both films' framing of suburbia through the medium of a television show. Moreover, Beuka argues, the insistent 'relegation to the past' of representations of suburbia in Millennial American culture operates as a form of denial, one which ignores the complexities and contradictions of 'a psychologically troublesome landscape that is nonetheless increasingly the dominant terrain of the nation.'[37] It is both ironic and intriguing, for instance, that *The Truman Show* uses the planned town of Seaside, Florida as its set. As one of the most noted achievements of the 'New Urbanism' movement, which stresses the role of neo-traditional design and architecture in fostering community, Seaside was intended to answer the problems associated with suburban sprawl. Yet the town evinces nostalgia for the kinds of lifestyles hoped for by early suburban pioneers. Further, in an echo of the original process of white flight, places like Seaside represent a desire to be removed from the troubles of the extant city as opposed to a willingness to engage with its problems. The use of film sets reminiscent of mid-twentieth century suburbs, then, fulfils yet simultaneously displaces a contemporary longing for a relatively static formulation of community and habitat.

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[36] Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 14.

[37] Ibid., p. 4.

Given the constricted discourses of gayness and suburbia it is understandable that much of gay and lesbian studies on the one hand and suburban studies on the other seem to share a common impulse: to investigate the considerable variety of gay and lesbian or suburban experience and to help broaden and complicate popular ideas about both. All too often though, appraisals of suburban homosexuality are asymmetrically reductive: the expansion of one concept is usually achieved at the cost of rendering the other narrowly. For example, in *Queer Space* Aaron Betsky complains that the suburbanization of gays fleeing the city in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic constitutes a betrayal of their subculture. By choosing an anonymous and conventional suburban lifestyle, Betsky argues, gays 'disavow the existence of a communal culture.'[38] Reciprocally, one study reclassifies Orange County, California, once a metaphor for the most egregious aspects of American suburbanization, as 'postsuburban'. One indicator of the region having transformed itself and of its transcendence of the category 'suburban' is the presence of a significant number of gay and lesbian residents.[39] So, it seems that if gays take to living in suburbs, either they effectively stop being gay, or those suburbs are no longer suburbs. The logic of this impasse is that homosexuality and suburbia are, after all, mutually exclusive. Such a conclusion is, however, neither sophisticated nor productive, and does not begin to consider the variety of motivations for moving to the suburbs, or the experiences gays have had living there, or indeed the kinds of suburbs they may prefer. Ironically, it is perhaps the very similarity between suburban studies and gay and lesbian studies that stands as an explanation for why the gap between the two fields has rarely been bridged. Certainly, in all the anthologies which explore the much-trumpeted 'geographical turn' in sexuality studies, suburban contexts are noticeably almost entirely absent, despite contrary statements of intent. Reciprocally, various suburban studies consider race, class and gender, but rarely interrogate sexuality and sexual identities.

In their anthology *Mapping Desire*, for instance, David Bell and Gill Valentine recognize and even affirm the continued preoccupation of the field of sexual geography with all things urban, explaining that 'social constructionist arguments about the development of gay identity suggests that this [emphasis] is predicated upon the opportunities offered by city life – anonymity and heterogeneity as well as sheer population

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[38] Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow, 1997), p. 192.
[39] *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County since World War II*, ed. Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 22.

size. Even the suburbs and small towns have been passed over in the rush to study the glamorous and sexy city.'[40] Unfortunately, *Mapping Desire* makes precisely the same omission, a marked weakness given its editors' awareness, notwithstanding the fact that it predates most of the recent sociological studies into gay suburban habitation (The book does, however, offer some space, albeit limited in extent, for the examination of rural sexual geographies). The same pattern is repeated in *Queers in Space,* an anthology of work exploring queer civic activism in 'urban, suburban and rural public spaces.'[41] Once again, suburban space is almost entirely passed over and rural environments are only sketchily considered. The book's preoccupation with the processes of 'territorialization', the production, defense and maintenance of identifiably LGBT or queer space further deprioritizes any consideration of the suburbs, which are deemed untransformable, impossible to lay claim to.[42]

The anthology *Decentring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis* constitutes a more concerted attempt to investigate non-metropolitan identities. Its project is to examine the lived, imagined and metaphorical sexual geographies away from metropolitan centres in which both normative and emancipatory sexual discourses are located, because 'it is in such spaces that hegemonic sexualities may be least stable.'[43] However, suburbs, whilst spatially marginal to the city, are usually understood to be central to hegemonic sexual discourse, to the extent that the ideological structures of family and heterosexuality inform its very architecture. As I will discuss further below and in chapters one and two, 'coming out' is the main strategy employed by Western lesbian and gay people when negotiating the suburbs. However, coming out − the acceptance and declaration of a sexual preference or identity, frequently coupled with the accession to a metropolitan sexual community − is often criticized as having become another monolithic way of organizing sexuality, with its own array of privileges and exclusions. In his essay in the same volume, for instance, Alan Sinfield complains that the term 'coming out' is

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[40] Bell and Valentine, *Mapping Desire*, p. 8.

[41] *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Spaces, Sites of Resistance,* ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1997), p. 3.

[42] Whilst I do examine the viability of gay suburban territories as represented in fictional texts later in chapter five, it must be said that conceptualizing space as territory is by no means the only approach possible. There are undoubtedly numerous strategies for conceiving, exploring and contesting the suburbs; indeed, perhaps there is more erotic, transgressive or even comic potential in doing the opposite, in accepting, even revelling in, the identity of the alien.

[43] *Decentring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis,* ed. Richard Phillips, David Shuttleton and Diane Watt (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 1.

'misleading, in so far as it allows the supposition that this kind of gayness was always there, waiting to be uncovered.'[44] In many non-metropolitan cultures, moreover, coming out is 'not the move that people are waiting to make; it is specifically foreign.'[45] Thus it would be arrogant to presume that the metropolitan model of gay identity is the formulation of homosexuality that all should aspire to. It is, then, unsurprising that the anthology passes over the suburban settings of numerous gay and lesbian narratives for rural and non-Western environs; indeed, the editors open discussion with works set on Wyoming mountainsides and in the Canadian Arctic.

The only contribution to *Decentring Sexualities* to consider suburbia is Barry Langford's 'Margins of the City: Towards a Dialectic of Suburban Desire', which examines Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), outlining the novel's disavowal of stable identities, be they sexual, racial or class-based, and its celebration of indeterminate constructions of the self. Rather than arguing that Kureishi's narrative articulates the suburbs as sites of resistance to metropolitan standards of cultural authenticity, Langford instead identifies a pattern whereby the 'suburban' characters acquire 'metropolitan' traits and vice versa, to the extent that by the novel's conclusion, these categories have been thoroughly destabilized.[46] Langford is not alone in being attracted to *The Buddha of Suburbia*'s willful indeterminacy. Elsewhere, David Oswell argues that the novel attempts to reconnect the time of its writing with that of its setting – the early 1990s with the 1970s – two periods characterized by a 'queer' sensibility, that is, a preoccupation with the political and aesthetic potential of performance and the manipulation of surface, and separated by the comparatively barren cultural landscape of the Thatcher era.[47] Susan Brook shows how Kureishi's novel 'queers' English suburbia, rendering unstable the traditional distinction between the city, a world of sexual possibility, and the repressed and repressive suburbs. Furthermore, some of suburbia's seemingly most unappealing attributes, for instance, its emphasis on surface and façade, actually open up 'possibilities for experimentation with appearances, and for a radicalized relationship to surfaces and style'; Kureishi shows the

[44] Alan Sinfield, 'The Production of Gay and the Return of Power', in *Decentring Sexualities*, ed. Phillips et al., pp. 21-36 (p. 21).
[45] Ibid., p. 22.
[46] Barry Langford, 'The Margins of the City: Towards a Dialectic of Suburban Desire', in *Decentring Sexualities*, ed. Phillips et al., pp. 64-80.
[47] David Oswell, 'True Love in Queer Times: Romance, Suburbia and Masculinity', in *Fatal Attractions and Cultural Subversions: Scripting Romance in Contemporary Literature and Film*, ed. Lynne Pearce and Gina Wisker (London: Pluto, 1998) pp. 157-75.

suburb to be 'literally eccentric, and as such becomes a space of sexual and social non-conformity.'[48]

Whilst an undoubtedly sophisticated and productive text (I return to discuss it briefly in chapter five), *The Buddha of Suburbia* appears to have monopolized critical attention with regards to suburban sexualities. There are, however, many other narratives which explore same-sex desire in a variety of suburban contexts, and any attempt to assess the place of the suburbs in a wider gay imaginary must give them due consideration. For instance, recent gay suburban narratives include, from Britain, *Beautiful Thing*, which takes the working-class housing estate of Thamesmead, southeast London, as its location.[49] The film depicts two teenage boys' discovery of their sexualities – and each other – and culminates in an uplifting scene of same-sex dancing in the estate's central piazza. *Get Real* is another 'coming-out' drama, and whilst set in an ostensibly very different kind of suburbia, the middle-class new town of Basingstoke, the film is similar to *Beautiful Thing* in that it attempts to establish a gay suburban presence. [50] One of the youthful protagonists even wishes that his parents would elope in order that he and his lover may take over the family home. From the US there is the Academy Award-winning *American Beauty*[51] and the television series *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001), both of which incorporate multiple homosexual narratives that parallel and bisect the suburban family home. In fiction a considerable range of writers explores homosexuality and suburban environments, from those considered relatively conventional, such as David Leavitt (e.g. *While England Sleeps*, which resounds with the command 'imagine Cockfosters,' a refrain that sends the protagonist exploring the outlying suburbs of 1930s London[52]) to 'literary outlaws' like Dennis Cooper, particularly his novels *Closer* and *Try*.[53] From Australia for instance there is Christos Tsiolkas's *Loaded* – adapted to screen as *Head On* – which follows a wandering and alienated gay Greek-Australian man through a multicultural though still wholly suburban Melbourne.[54]

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[48] Susan Brook, 'Hedgemony? Queering the Suburb in Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia', paper given at the 'Queer Matters' conference, Kings College, London, 29 April 2004.
[49] *Beautiful Thing*, dir. Hattie McDonald, FilmFour, 1996.
[50] *Get Real*, dir. Simon Shore, Paramount, 1998.
[51] *American Beauty*, dir. Sam Mendes, Dreamworks, 1999.
[52] David Leavitt, *While England Sleeps* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).
[53] Dennis Cooper, *Closer* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), and *Try* (New York: Grove, 1994).
[54] Christos Tsiolkas, *Loaded* (Milsons Point, NSW: Vintage, 1995); *Head On*, dir. Ana Kokkinos, Strand, 1997.

The cultural products detailed above amount to the briefest sketch of the extent of gay suburban narratives, highlighting only some of the more widely disseminated texts. But already their number and variety suggests that there are many more kinds of responses to suburbia than the stark choice between flight and hiding suggested by Medhurst's comments above. Admittedly, many of these texts are conventionally scathing about both the suburban landscape, frequently declaimed to be dehumanizing in its monotony and drabness, and the 'suburban mentality', comprising of, in equal parts, material aspiration and conservative insularity. In this respect gay suburban narratives appear to stand as a continuation of the plethora of writings from earlier in the twentieth century which unrelentingly castigated the suburbs. Indeed, these texts — almost entirely the output of middle and upper-middle class writers — have since been collectively labeled the 'suburban canon',[55] so familiar and uniform are their execrations of suburban landscape and life. At its most dismissive, the canon simply defines the suburbs as a void, an absence. As a splendidly urbane E. F. Benson character has it, 'the proper definition of suburbs is the place to which one does not go. They are merely a negative geographical expression.'[56] Similarly, and more infamously, Gertrude Stein complained of Oakland, California, 'when you get there, there isn't any there there.'[57] The suburbs were frequently held in contempt for despoiling the exurban countryside: for instance, in E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*, the 'red rust' of suburban housing is anxiously perceived to be encroaching on the rural idyll of the eponymous house.[58] The maddeningly iterative landscapes of speculative suburban development were also judged to be places of intolerable regulation or incarceration. The anonymous, ubiquitous street of George Bowling, the downtrodden anti-hero of George Orwell's *Coming up for Air* is, for example, 'just a prison with the cells all in a row. A line of semi-detached torture chambers.'[59] Elsewhere, suburbs were simply deemed the fittingly banal habitat of a spiritually and culturally impoverished people, the lower-middle classes. John Betjemen's notorious poem 'Slough' begs for the destruction of the eponymous new town, where the men-folk do little else than 'talk of sports and makes of cars/ In various

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[55] Paul H. Mattingley, 'The Suburban Canon over Time', in *Suburban Discipline*, ed. Peter Lang and Tam Miller (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), pp. 38-51.
[56] E. F. Benson, *Mammon and Co.* (London: Collins, 1899), p. 103.
[57] Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (London: Virago, 1985 [1937]).
[58] E. M. Forster, *Howard's End* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992 [1910]), p. 316.
[59] George Orwell, *Coming up for Air* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987 [1939]), p. 13.

bogus Tudor bars'.[60] C. Day Lewis decries the pelmet-high horizons of the ubiquitous villa-dweller, taking the new availability of luxuries – in particular mass-produced labour-saving devices and soft furnishings – as demonstrative of suburbanites' feminine indolence and depoliticized self-satisfaction: they are 'at bay in villas [...] content with cushions'.[61] (I will return to the long-established association between embourgeoisized femininity and the suburban domestic interior as it strongly permeates certain recent gay texts in chapter five).

For most intellectuals in the early to mid-twentieth century, 'suburban', like the term 'the masses', was 'a sign for the unknowable.'[62] Contributors to the suburban critical canon were typically distanced and isolated from the culture they mistrusted and feared. By contrast, more recent suburban narratives are much more likely to be steeped in the experience of suburbs. Miranda Sawyer's recent exploration of Britain's suburbs, *Park and Ride*, for instance, is avowedly inspired by the author's suburban provenance.[63] According to Mark Clapson, much the same can be said for historians of suburbanization: an increasing number preface their work with a declaration of their suburban background, which apparently correlates with noticeably less condemnatory assessments of suburbia.[64] It is, however, certainly the case that the suburban origins of some cultural producers inspire little else than vitriol: for example, almost the whole of Mike Leigh's oeuvre, from *Abigail's Party* (BBC, 1977) to *Vera Drake*, constitutes a sustained and withering attack on the aspirant pretensions of suburbia, and in particular, suburban women.[65] Nevertheless, numerous recent suburban narratives accord with Paul H. Mattingly's desire to wrest the cultural evaluation of suburbs away from the suburban critical canon and to take it into the hands of those who have invested their lives there.[66] Both Mattingly and Peter Lang aim to counter over-familiar representations of suburbia as a place that is always alien or escaped from with more analysis of the attractions of suburbs, or, as Mattingly has it, their 'tremendous gut appeal.'[67]

[60] John Betjemen, 'Slough', in *Poetry of the Thirties*, ed. Robin Skelton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 75.
[61] C. Day Lewis, 'The Magic Mountain 25', in *The Complete Poems of C. Day Lewis* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 161.
[62] John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Amongst the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber, 1992), p. 53.
[63] Miranda Sawyer, *Park and Ride: Adventures in Suburbia* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 1999).
[64] Clapson, *Suburban Century*, p. 9.
[65] *Vera Drake*, dir. Mike Leigh, Thin Man, 2004. See Clapson, *Suburban Century*, pp. 10-3, for a wide-ranging survey of anti-suburban sentiment in English and North American post-war popular culture.
[66] Mattingly, 'The Suburban Canon Over Time', pp. 41-2.
[67] Ibid. p. 7.

Gay narratives, particularly, often locate in suburbia sources of excitement and opportunity, usually sexual. By identifying sites of sexual interest in the suburbs, however, gay stories are not mere variants of the conventional 'dual-narrative' of suburbia, where respectable conformity – neat lawns and washed-every-Sunday cars, nine-to-five regularity etc – conceals (hetero)sexual licentiousness going on indoors. One of the most graphic and critical renderings of this kind of sexual duplicity was the early punks' choice of fetish outfits and paraphernalia for everyday wear. Such a style was, according Barry Langford, 'intended as both deeply suburban and a clear rebuke to a suburban sexuality they excoriated as hypocritical, dissimulating and coercive.'[68] But if gay narratives also exhibit some kind of double aspect, it is produced differently from performances of straight suburbia. Whereas the latter are facilitated with relative ease by the secure binary of public/private, gay stories necessarily invert or complicate this dichotomy: cruising for sex, for example, typically occurs in *semi*-secret; occluded from the mainstream public but in places visible to and permeable by other men seeking sex with men.

Textual Approaches and Methodological Parameters

This thesis examines American and British gay texts which are located in American and British – or, more specifically, English – suburban settings. To consider in addition other Western anglophone contexts, for instance Australian, Canadian, Irish or South African, would be beyond the scope of a single study.[69] This thesis, however, is not primarily intended to be a comparative study of British and American gay suburban narratives. In any case, arguably, these texts share more similarities than differences, or rather, where there are differences they tend to be superficial. Indeed, others have argued more generally that in spite of the diverse material manifestations of suburbia, all suburban environments ultimately have the same function in common. Roger Silverstone, for example, acknowledges the architectural distinctiveness of the ribbon developments on the outskirts

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[68] Barry Langford, 'The Margins of the City: Towards a Dialectic of Suburban Desire', in *Decentring Sexualities*, ed. Phillips et al., pp. 64-80 (p. 70). Miranda Sawyer's foray into the swingers' scene in sensible Surrey seems to confirm the binary of outward conformity versus private irregular sexual practices as being part of a contemporary mythology of suburbia (Sawyer, *Park and Ride*, pp. 84-101). However, John Carey notes that the trope is a long-established one, citing Arthur Machen's 1922 novel *The Secret Glory*, as an early tirade against suburbia's 'abominable hypocrisy' (Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, pp. 51-2).
[69] Some recent investigations into Australian gay suburban contexts include Stephen Hodge, '"No Fags out There": Gay Men, Identity, and Suburbia', in *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies*, 1 (1995), 41–8, and Karen Brooks, 'Shit Creek: Suburbia, Abjection and Subjectivity in Australian "Grunge" Fiction', *Australian Literary Studies*, 18 (1998), 87-100.

of 1930s London versus the great expanses of tract house subdivisions spreading across post-war America, or the elegant villas of Early Victorian London against the clapboard and brick of 1950s Sydney. Nevertheless he insists that 'in each case the suburb is the embodiment of the same ideal as well as the practical solution, imperfectly realized in both cases, and arguably unrealizable: the attempt to marry town and country, and to create for middle classes middle cultures in middle spaces in middle America, Britain or Australia.'[70]

Often, however, English suburbs are distinguished from those of America (or, for that matter, Australia) on the basis that their strikingly different exurban landscapes reveal not just contrasting aesthetics, but also quite distinct ideals.[71] If much of English suburbia has incorporated elements of a manageable and relatively safe countryside, as evidenced by the importance invested in the enclosed space of the garden, some American suburban environments reflect a very different conceptualization of the rural. In particular, the swathes of tract houses speculatively built after World War Two, unfenced and reminiscent in their styling of early ranch homesteads, evoke the wilderness of the American frontier. In their expansiveness these suburbs – often taken as being archetypal of American suburbia – capture the desire for freedom and opportunity that residents share with the early pioneers of the West. For example, Kevin Roderick characterizes the vast suburban expanse of the San Fernando Valley, California as 'America's Suburb'.[72] (This metonymy, however, does rather tend to obscure the history of American suburbanization before World War Two, including the relatively more densely built 'railway suburbs' of the mid-nineteenth century and later 'streetcar suburbs' that proliferated in a number of cities.[73])

However, gay suburban narratives, with the notable exception of Dennis Cooper's novels, examined in chapter three, do not significantly engage with the rural landscape beyond the suburban fringe or with the elements of the countryside captured and expressed through suburban architecture. Rather, these stories' momentum, if they do indeed start in the suburbs, is almost invariably centripetal. Whilst generally it may be reasonable to

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[70] Silverstone, *Visions of Suburbia*, p. 4.

[71] Deborah Stevenson observes how the names of some new Australian suburban developments 'conjure notions of a rural that is not Australian. Instead, they draw on established pastoral myths that have their roots in pre-industrial Britain.' Yet, the advertisements depicting these new houses 'draw primarily on myths of Australian rather than British nature. In particular, they evoke a sense of limitless space that is not an element of the English pastoral myth.' Deborah Stevenson, *Cities and Urban Cultures* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), p. 124.

[72] Kevin Roderick, *The San Fernando Valley: America's Suburb* (Los Angeles, Los Angeles Times Books, 2001).

[73] See Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

interpret suburbs as integrating, coherently or otherwise, aspects of the urban and the rural, in gay narratives suburban dwellers only interact with the city. Hence, the elements that supposedly render American and English suburbs distinct simply do not apply to gay suburban narratives. Moreover, the urban gay milieus that typically constitute the final destination of the protagonist of the coming-out story (of which more below) – whether it takes place in New York, London or indeed many other metropolitan centres across the globe – are often understood as American formations. Nick Walker comments: 'walk down Old Compton Street and you see the American influence right down to the souls of the Timberland boots. The gay village is, after all, an American concept [...] London's status as the gay capital of Europe is partially an expression of the fact that England is an American colony.'[74] Potentially, then, in a great number of gay narratives, suburbs and cities function in very similar ways, regardless of their local specificity. (However, in chapter two, I complicate this assumption by demonstrating how specifically British modes and concerns – in particular, the desire to prove the possibility of the accommodation of gay people in non-metropolitan places – are contrary to an American model of gay urbanity, which has resulted in the production of hybrid, dissonant texts.)

Whilst acknowledging the factors that make gay suburban narratives similar, it would be wise to remain sensitive to the distinctiveness of suburban environments on either side of the Atlantic, or between suburbs of different regions within the same country, or indeed the same suburbs in different periods of time. To do so is not necessarily an easy task: as Silverstone comments, reading the suburbs can be a disorientating experience, since they are almost invariably 'both intensely particular and idiosyncratic and at the same time bathetically familiar.'[75] Nevertheless, many of the differences – sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious – between the suburban settings of the gay texts I examine have material consequences on the way sexuality and sexual identity is conceived, or otherwise affects the narrative form of these stories.

These contrasts take surprising forms. One might expect, for instance, that in keeping with the position held by the automobile in mid- and late-twentieth American culture as an icon of individual liberty, the considerably greater use of the car in American suburbs, compared to their English equivalents, might equate with enhanced freedom and therefore social and sexual opportunity. Actually, however, many American gay suburban narratives

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[74] Nick Walker, 'Gay Capital of Europe', *Independent*, 6 July 1996, quoted in Sinfield, *Gay and After*, p. 103.
[75] Silverstone, *Visions of Suburbia*, p. ix.

foreground instead the negative aspects of car dependency. For example, Kevin Killian (whose work I return to in chapter three), writer of several fictions set in suburbs of Long Island, New York, emphasizes the emotional and physical disassociation that car ownership seemingly engenders. In one instance he admits 'I never gave my feelings much credence, I think partly because I did own a car and thus could slink in and out of situations like the Pink Panther in the cartoons.'[76] Another Long Island text, the film *L.I.E.*, is even named after a road, Long Island's central commuting artery. Yet, the road affords the movie's teenage protagonist Howie no opportunity to escape suburban delinquency, and he never makes it the few miles down the road to New York City. The perpetual flux of traffic serves only to reinforce Howie's own lack of direction and momentum: when considering suicide on an overpass, he declares 'on the Long Island Expressway there are lanes going east, lanes going west, and lanes going straight to hell.'[77] Indeed, the only two people who appear to offer Howie any love and guidance, his mother and the gay pornographer-cum-driving instructor father figure 'Big John' are both killed on the L.I.E. Living in England without a car, meanwhile, is not necessarily a limitation: in Oscar Moore's *A Matter of Life and Sex*, which I examine in chapter five, the teenage Hugo makes short work of north London suburbia under pedal-power alone.

Much has been made by geographers and historians of the differences between the cities of Eastern and Western USA, or alternatively, between the longer-established north-eastern metropolises and the newer cities of the Sunbelt. Physically, Boston and New York are quite unlike Los Angeles, Phoenix or Miami: the latter three are all more residential and decentred, that is, less dominated – structurally, socially or economically – by a distinct urban core. In short, these cities are more suburban than their eastern counterparts. Being newer and more dispersed, Western/Sunbelt cities have often been seen as fostering a sense of individual freedom; indeed, John M. Findley notes that those settling in Western suburbs after leaving Eastern cities saw themselves as 'creating altogether new patterns' of living.[78] On the other hand, their relative lack of a dense urban centre has sometimes led to the criticism that such cities are incoherent, anonymous and cultureless. The effective absence of an urban centre will of course have significant implications for a narrative that has so far been characterized as being organized around the poles of suburb and city. It will probably

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[76] Kevin Killian, 'Santa', in *Little Men* (West Stockbridge, MA: Hard Press, 1996), 13-31 (p. 14).

[77] *L.I.E.*, dir. Michael Cuesta, Lot 47, 2001.

[78] John M. Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture after 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 278.

come as no surprise that the trajectories of the gay texts set in L.A. suburbs are either vaguer or more chaotic than those of texts located in Eastern cities. Nevertheless, a gay centre is arguably felt in these L.A. stories as an absent presence; the all-consuming vapidity of West Hollywood rather acts to define all that these narratives, and their main characters, are not, a feeling confirmed by their protagonists' or authors' excoriation of the 'scene'. Reciprocally, the gay centres of Eastern cities – such as the district of Chelsea in New York City, with its proliferation of gay residences and consumer lifestyles – are sometimes constituted as suburban.

Throughout, my thesis examines the significance of suburbia in a gay male imaginary. Whilst I have so far persistently referred to lesbians along with gay men, 'lesbian and gay' communities, as well as the more inclusive designation 'LGBT', what follows is predominantly an investigation of texts both produced by and featuring gay men. Where it has seemed illuminating to do so, I have drawn parallels with the lesbian, bisexual and transgendered – and, indeed, heterosexual – contexts; I do not presume, however, that other experiences, readings or constructions of suburbia will be inevitably equivalent to those of gay men. For instance, several of my analyses of gay suburban narratives vitally also consider issues of gender. These focus particularly on effeminacy, which – by definition – does not pertain, at least directly, to female experience. Certainly, further intellectual work is necessary to investigate the multiple ways suburbs have been conceived and contested by different subjectivities, which are too varied to be considered within the scope of a single study.[79]

My preferred nomenclature for sexual identity so far also suggests certain assumptions and a particular approach to sexual politics: this thesis is an avowedly 'gay' project, as opposed to a 'queer' one. Briefly, a queer politics possesses a deep suspicion of all fixed sexual and gender categories – including 'gay' and 'lesbian' – which are deemed limiting, hierarchical. Further, following Foucault, the supposedly emancipatory categories of 'gay' and 'lesbian' are found to be inevitably implicated in structures and cycles of knowledge and power.[80] As Judith Butler suggests, the 'instrumental uses of "identity" [can] become regulatory imperatives', 'the very paradigm of what calls to be classified, regulated and

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[79] Clare Hemmings examines the possibility of bisexual spaces (albeit in urban contexts) in 'From Landmarks to Spaces: Mapping the Territory of a Bisexual Genealogy', in *Queers in Space*, ed. Ingram et al., pp. 147-62. Judith Halberstam explores transgender representations in non-metropolitan contexts in *In a Queer Time and Place*.

[80] See Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*.

controlled'.[81] Queer celebrates instead disruptive, hybrid and fluid subjectivities. Its methodology is principally deconstructive; in order to empower marginalized peoples, including sexual minorities, Queer tackles heterosexist orthodoxies and hegemonic institutions by articulating the manufacturedness of what is generally presumed natural and inevitable, thereby delegitimizing and destabilizing dominant structures. Some of the works cited above, including Bell and Valentine's *Mapping Desire* and Ingram et al.'s *Queers in Space*, propose approaching space along just these lines. By harnessing the theoretical work of Butler, Bell and Valentine declare that queer projects like theirs are able 'to understand the role of performativity and theatricality in constructing the self, and space, as prediscursively straight.'[82] Furthermore, they argue that 'by adapting Butler's discussion of "subversive bodily acts" to think about *subversive spatial acts* we can see how even the kiss of two men on the night bus home can fracture and rupture a previously seamless [...] space.'[83] My problem with a project that attempts to queer suburban space is twofold. Firstly, it is unnecessary to work towards proving the prediscursive heterosexism of the suburbs. Quite simply, the straightness of suburbia is self-evident; indeed, the clear majority of the texts I examine take the fact for granted. Secondly, it is simply not clear that demonstrating the contingency of the dominant in any context inevitably undermines its authority (I return to these concerns in further detail in chapter five, wherein I examine several gay suburban narratives which show the ineffectualness of such strategies). What I am more preoccupied with is examining suburbia's role in the production of gay identity, and further, how gay men have been engaging in cultural work that explores and contests their own investment in suburban space. Several of the texts I deal with evince ambivalence or hostility towards gay identity, with some, as a result, earning themselves the appellation 'queer' (for example, the novels of Dennis Cooper and Oscar Moore's *A Matter of Life and Sex*). Nevertheless, these texts still closely engage with the way in which sexuality and sexual identity interacts with space and, more particularly, are very much interested in the opportunities gay men find in suburban environments.

Once again, one of the principle criticisms from a queer perspective is that constructions of 'gay' are too narrowly based and restrictive. I aim to show, however, that

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[81] Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991) pp. 13-31 (p. 16).

[82] In particular, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[83] Bell and Valentine, *Mapping Desire*, pp. 18-9.

suburban narratives help render gay identities and subcultures complex. This thesis will argue that the locations of gay suburban narratives are best appreciated as sites of negotiation, where sexually dissident cultural producers may assess and contest the forms of interaction between themselves or their own subcultures and mainstream society. Indeed, gay suburban narratives constitute precisely what Alan Sinfield hails as 'subcultural contributions', interventions which '[discuss] the relations that we have among ourselves and the mainstream, and invite us to negotiate new situations in the future.'[84] My principal task, therefore, is to elucidate and evaluate different subcultural strategies for dealing with suburbia. These varied approaches, which I consider chapter by chapter, offer distinct visions of what it is to be gay and how gayness ought to be organized, in part by arguing for different ways of interacting with the mainstream. Taken together the suburban narratives I examine provide a textured, versatile picture of gay identity and politics in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century.

It is my hope that these same gay narratives also contribute to the expansion of the once monologic discourse on the suburbs. Roger Webster claims that the new heteroglossia surrounding suburbia increasingly shows it to be 'a zone of contested meaning', and projects such as Webster's *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives* have done much to complicate constructions of the suburbs along lines of class, race, nationality and gender.[85] Once again, though, it is the absence of sexuality in this list, coupled with a reciprocal suburban lacuna in much of the recent pioneering work on sexual geographies that has provided motivation for this project. One implication of examining suburban narratives as a form of negotiation between subcultures and the mainstream, however, is that, from the outset, suburban spaces necessarily represent straight society. With the suburbs standing metonymically for conventional heterosexual culture, it may seem that gay suburban narratives are simply re-inscribing, not challenging, familiar ideas of what the suburbs are all about. To an extent, such a concern is justified: the overwhelming majority of the texts I examine in the following five chapters position suburban environments, initially at least, as places organized around the heterosexual family, and as often hostile to homosexuality. Many of the same texts also point to the city as the place one needs to go to be gay. That most gay narratives initially construct suburb and city in this conventionally polarized way is hardly surprising. Unlike members of racial groups, gay and lesbian

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[84] Sinfield, *Gay and After*, p. 115.
[85] Roger Webster, *Expanding Suburbia: Reviewing Suburban Narratives* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2000), p. 6.

people are not, or only extremely rarely, born into their own communities. Instead, they are typically raised in heterosexual familial environments, which must either be fully or partially left behind in order that they may adhere to gay subculture. Distinguishing them from other groups, Alan Sinfield characterizes lesbian and gay subculture as a 'reverse diaspora'; 'instead of dispersing, we assemble'.[86] Michael Warner states more strongly that 'there is no remote place or time, not even in myth and fantasy, from which lesbians and gay men have dispersed'.[87] In a sense though, Warner is only half right. There is no place, real or imagined, which gay men and lesbians have come from *where there were gay men and lesbians*. However – and whilst this risks positing them as a singular place – suburbs do come closest to fulfilling the role of that real and imagined place of origin. As virtually all of the texts examined in this thesis demonstrate, suburbia represents or invokes a situation, usually childhood or adolescence, which is prior to the discovery of or accession to urban gay subcultures.

The most familiar form of gay narrative that depicts childhood and adolescence is undoubtedly the coming-out story, the account of a young individual coming to terms with his or her homosexuality. For at least three decades, the coming-out story has become the most prolific and recognizable of all gay and lesbian genres, whether in print, on film or simply spoken. This periodization identifies the coming-out story as a precipitate of the new, highly visible forms of gay and lesbian activism that emerged in the West around 1970. The development of a radical gay and lesbian politics is often referred to emblematically as '(post-)Stonewall', after the gay riots outside the bar of the same name in New York City. The writer Samuel R. Delaney articulates in no uncertain terms how the post-Stonewall era and coming out have become synonymous. Whilst feeling ambivalent about his own coming-out story, Delaney states that, generally:

> 'Coming out' has acquired extraordinary significance in the gay community since the Stonewall riots of 1969 – so much significance that many of us might even say that coming out 'defines' the difference between being gay and an older, pre-gay notion of being homosexual. During those (post-Stonewall) times in which, if you hadn't 'come out of the closet,' many gay men and lesbians felt that you had somehow betrayed them, that you couldn't really 'define yourself as gay,' and that you had not 'accepted your gay identity'.[88]

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[86] Sinfield, *Gay and After*, pp. 30-1.

[87] *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. xvii.

[88] Samuel R. Delaney, 'Coming/Out', in *Boys Like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories*, ed. Patrick Merla (London: Fourth Estate, 1997), pp. 1-26 (p. 1).

Ironically – as Delaney is himself well aware – the post-Stonewall notion of 'coming out' is derived from a 'pre-gay' term, which refers to the act of joining, or being received by, the homosexual underworld. Both concepts share the idea of becoming part of a community. The politicized, post-Stonewall formulation of 'community', however, requires the full visibility and permanent participation of its members; 'pre-gay' forms of association, out of necessity, usually operated in the opposite fashion. But 'coming out' has earlier antecedents still. The pre-Stonewall usage of the term was itself a camp borrowing from a more mainstream (or at least, upper middle-class) concept of 'coming out', which describes female debutantes emerging out of familial domesticity and into society, and eligibility for marriage. Both homosexual and gay/lesbian coming out follows this trajectory, from the individual's initial extrication or ejection from the blood family to his or her inception into a sexual minority subculture. All three forms of 'coming out' described so far, then, broadly share a spatial and a temporal paradigm: the movement out of the home and into a 'society' that is almost always urban-located, and a transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Although not all of the primary texts examined in this thesis are coming-out stories, they all derive from the period following Stonewall.[89] Such is the inevitable consequence of a declared 'gay' project; to expect to find contemporary models of gay identity in pre-liberation narratives would be to ignore the potentially radically different cultural and historical specificities that shaped those texts and risk a crude revisionism.[90] Each gay suburban narrative is organized by or otherwise responds to the same two mutually differentiating locations in time and space: growing up in the suburbs, and adult gay life in the city. The thesis is arranged in two parts, reflecting two principal forms of gay suburban narrative. The first section examines those texts which are predominantly accounts of homosexual adolescents living in and, more often that not, emerging from suburbia. The second considers stories which appear to reverse this trajectory, narrating the return of gay men to the suburbs. Whilst useful for the purposes of presentation, I will show that ultimately this distinction breaks down. Several texts do explicitly describe both their

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[89] Most indeed were first produced after 1980; the 1980s saw a publishing boom in openly gay and lesbian material, a phenomenon Robert McRuer names in title of his study *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

[90] In chapter two I consider a 'pre-gay' text, Quentin Crisp's autobiography *The Naked Civil Servant* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), but this is to help outline specifically British historical and cultural contexts.

protagonist's emergence from, and their return to, the suburbs. But more significantly, virtually all gay suburban narratives implicitly enact a 'return' to the suburbs. As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, most coming-out stories, for instance, are retrospective accounts told by the 'out' narrator, and so inevitably reconnect the protagonist with his suburban past, despite their culminating with urban relocation. In being at least as pre-occupied with revisiting as they are with departing from the suburbs, gay suburban narratives profoundly complicate notions of 'homecoming'. They suggest that Paul Monette's assertion that 'home is the place you get to, not the place you came from' – which Sinfield takes as supporting his assessment that gay subculture is a 'reverse diaspora' – is too narrow.[91] 'Home', then, in gay suburban narratives, is neither simply a destination nor only an origin, but a continued negotiation between the two. The anthology *Hometowns: Gay Men Write about Where They Belong* exemplifies the ambiguity of 'home' in the gay imaginary: gay writers were asked to 'approach their hometowns, either their birthplace or the place they've chosen to live as adults, and describe their context and how they react to their place in the world.'[92] John Preston uses his editor's prerogative to include two accounts, one which describes growing up in his New England hometown and the other his semi-retirement to Portland, Maine. Both accounts also allude to his hectic gay life in a string of great cities, from Los Angeles to New York, yet each location is understood as contributing vitally to his understanding of himself and his position in society. (I return to several of the contributions to *Hometowns* in chapters one and four.) In any case, it is probably impossible to view where one has come from except through the frame of where one has got to: most of the texts I examine re-evaluate the suburbs from the perspective of having achieved gay identity, identifying many aspects which are reflective of or even conducive to gay lives.

Given that I am in large part examining the emergence of individuals from families, the formation of adult subjectivities that coalesce around sexuality, as well as the implications of interrogating memories of childhood and adolescence, one theoretical framework that may seem useful is that of psychoanalysis. Certainly, such an approach may serve to illuminate the psychological processes involved in identity formation. However, caution is required when analysing coming-out narratives within a psychoanalytic framework, given

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[91] Paul Monette, *Halfway Home* (New York: Crown, 1991), p. 262, quoted in Sinfield, *Gay and After*, p. 30.
[92] *Hometowns: Gay Men Write about Where They Belong*, ed. John Preston (New York: Dutton, 1991), p. xvii.

the historical antagonism of the gay and lesbian movement towards Freudian thought. As Esther Saxey observes, the coming-out story, 'a vibrantly anti-psychoanalytic literary genre', was born out of a radical identity politics which 'often stress[ed] the authority of members of an oppressed group to analyse their own situation, and attacks the power and control exercised by institutions such as psychoanalysis and medicine.' She continues:

> The consciousness-raising group positions itself in opposition to the therapy group because it locates individual problems within the social and political, rather than seeking individual psychological solutions. Gay liberation writers and theorists take a similar line: that psychoanalysis is used to preserve the status quo, that it removes authority from the oppressed individual, that it is prescriptive and normative. The history of psychiatric abuse of those who expressed same-sex desire feeds that hostility.[93]

In spite of the anti-psychoanalytic history of the gay movement, recently several theorists have reappraised Freudian thought (particularly as understood and practiced in North American contexts), and have attempted to dismantle the homophobic distinction between normative psychological health and sexual pathology by, for instance, 'demonstrating in Freudian thought that the sexual drive is perverse in its very constitution.'[94] However, there is not sufficient space or scope in this thesis to examine these debates in further detail. I do, though, broadly agree with Christopher Lane's assertion that 'by insisting that men and women are subject to the unconscious, psychoanalysis is "anti-identarian", in the sense that it pits sexuality against coherent and normative definitions of identity.'[95] As I have made clear, the project of this thesis is explicitly identarian, though the identities in question are neither necessarily fully coherent nor normative. I am specifically interested in how spatialized narrative trajectories organize and complicate gay identities, and, especially, with how suburban space has affected the way in which 'gay' has been constituted over the last three decades. Furthermore, suburbia has featured so regularly and prominently in constructions and contestations of gay subculture, yet has remained under-examined. To

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[93] Esther Saxey, 'Homoplot: The Coming out Story as Identity Narrative' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2003), pp. 9-10.

[94] John Fletcher, 'Freud and His Uses: Psychoanalysis and Gay Theory', in *Coming on Strong: Gay Politics and Culture*, ed. Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 90-118, (p. 115). See also, for example, John Brenkman, *Straight Male Modern: A Cultural Critique of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 'Pink Freud', a special edition of *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, ed. Diana Fuss, 2 (1995), and *Disorientating Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Reappraisals of Sexual Identities*, ed. Thomas Domenici and Ronnie C. Lesser (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[95] Christopher Lane, 'Psychoanalysis and Sexual Identity, in *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997), pp. 160-75 (p. 170).

better understand and evaluate 'subcultural contributions', one must prioritize an analysis of the role of suburban space over psychoanalytic models.

My thesis's title indicates that it will focus on film and fiction. I also, however, examine a number of written autobiographies. Whilst spoken coming-out stories are inevitably autobiographical, written ones often blur the distinction between fiction and autobiography. For example, the protagonist of Mike Albo's *Hornito: My Lie Life*, which I address in chapter one, shares the author's name, but rather than authenticating the novel as autobiographical, the eponymy serves to indicate the manner in which the character and his memories are fabricated: as the book's publicity has it, 'Albo creates "Mike Albo." This character's memories are from a fictional life that's [...] embarrassingly real'.[96] Similarly, critics cannot make up their mind if Kevin Killian's *Bedrooms Have Windows*, considered in chapter three, is a novel or a memoir, and Oscar Moore's *A Matter of Life and Sex*, examined in chapter five, is an avowed *roman-à-clef*, or, as the author admits, 'an autobiography thinly disguised as a novel'.[97] Moreover, once again, I am principally concerned with the way these texts are organized, particularly with regard to the relative positions of the suburbs and the city. Since these narrative structures are unaffected by whether the story is fictional or not, I make no special consideration for autobiography as a distinct category.

I do not claim to have covered every British and American gay suburban narrative ever produced. However, whilst it is not possible to provide a totally exhaustive survey, the range of texts I have selected for close analysis is certainly extensive. Gay suburban narratives not considered in this thesis would very likely complement the discussion of other texts in one of the following five chapters, with each exploring a distinct social and/or literary context and assessing a particular subcultural strategy with regards to suburbia.

In chapter one I examine a number of apparently conventional American coming-out stories (novels, autobiographies, short stories) which are very much structured around urban relocation. These texts, I argue, deliver gay identity through a distinct narrative trajectory of suburban-to-urban migration. However, I show that the coming-out story actually works in two opposing directions, being as preoccupied with recuperating early experiences of suburbia as it is in signposting the way out of suburbia to the city and fully-fledged gayness. Most significantly, the conventional coming-out story seeks to reclaim the

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[96] Mike Albo, *Hornito: My Lie Life* (New York: Perennial, 2001 [2000]), rear cover.
[97] Oscar Moore, *PWA: Looking AIDS in the Face* (London: Picador, 1996), p. xxxii.

figure of the 'suburban sissy' as a proto-gay hero; the sissy's effeminacy, rendered perpetually visible by the transparency of the suburban landscape, is interpreted as something like the 'out' behaviour of the adult gay man. This equivalence productively complicates notions of gay identity and acts as a criticism of the tendency towards conformity in urban gay cultures.

Not all coming-out stories emphasize becoming part of a gay community and the urban migration that is required to do so. Indeed, the act of 'coming out' has come to mean less the claiming of an identity by way of joining a community and more the disclosure of one's sexual preference to those presumed ignorant of the fact. Coming out is now not so much about meeting homosexuals as it is about talking to heterosexuals. The current OED definition seems to indicate such a shift: 'to openly declare that one is homosexual' suggest a *public* pronouncement. Furthermore, the term 'coming out' has entered broad parlance, and its referents have proliferated. But it still much more frequently denotes the revealing of a stigmatized practice or experience (e.g. to come out as a user of heroin, as an incest survivor, or a 'computer geek'), than it does the politicization of a minority identity (e.g. to come out as disabled).

In chapter two I examine some recent gay coming-out stories – mostly British films – which articulate this change in meaning. Some of these narratives are set wholly within suburban environments and seemingly circumvent the requirement for urban relocation. The films' suburban settings, and particularly their suburban denouements, attempt to demonstrate the possibility of reconciliation between gays and their families and heterosexual communities. Given that the suburbs in these films are markers for the conventional family and society (which, nonetheless, have the capacity to accommodate homosexuality), potentially the suburbanization of the coming-out story represents a capitulation to the straight mainstream. I argue, however, that these films can help to re-energize a somewhat maligned genre, one that has often been described as a mere adolescent 'stage' of gay and lesbian political and cultural production, whose time has passed. This assessment, though, is tempered by the way in which the films betray anxieties about a more permanent gay suburban presence, and ultimately reinstate urban escape routes and return to a more conventional – and American – coming-out narrative structure.

Not all narratives which depict homosexual adolescents appear particularly interested in the experience of coming-out; indeed several writers are professedly skeptical about gay identity. In chapter three I argue that those associated with the American 'New Narrative'

movement, particularly Dennis Cooper and Kevin Killian, have produced more challenging and rewarding accounts of suburban homosexuality. The novels of Cooper and Killian disavow or deconstruct the traditional coming-out story, partly out of a suspicion of the limitations and inauthenticity of received forms of narrative, and partly from a sense that suburban environments actually present intellectual and aesthetic opportunity. These writers appear to concentrate on and champion what is so often denigrated about the suburbs: their apparent blankness and a-historicity. Such qualities render suburbia as a place of liberation and creative possibility, where grand narratives – including that of gay identity – are less able to operate.

In the second section of my thesis, which contains chapters four and five, I consider texts which examine an adult, as opposed to an adolescent, gay presence in the suburbs. In chapter four I investigate the 'return' to the suburbs from the perspective of conservative gay critics and writers based in the United States. Many of these commentators have called for subcultural interventions which celebrate the ordinariness of 'mainstream' gay life. The predominantly suburb-located fiction of American writer David Leavitt is most frequently mobilized in this respect. However, Leavitt's suburban texts complicate or resist their deployment by the gay right: memories of suburban childhood precipitate a form of infantilization that contradicts attempts to posit suburban life as a mature alternative to an allegedly juvenile urban subculture.

Rather than assimilating to suburban culture, however, the more polemical novels of James Robert Baker and Oscar Moore, which I consider in the final chapter, attempt to subvert it. In particular, they try to disrupt the symbolic ecology of suburbia by establishing the presence of a sexualized or diseased body in domestic space. However, these texts ultimately show the weakness of such a course of action: simply, the signification of the suburbs is demonstrably immune to semantic subversion. Baker's and Moore's novels show that a more practicable and felicitous tactic is to revisit and reclaim suburban sites with gay subcultural significance; both texts recover histories – even archaeologies – of homosexual contact embedded in a landscape usually presumed to be devoid of a past.

Part I

Coming out of the Suburbs?
Locating Homosexual Adolescence

Chapter One
No Place to Hide: The Suburban Sissy and Conventional Coming-out Trajectories

The coming-out story, the most familiar and prolific of American sexual identity narratives, is a suburban genre. Such a characterization probably sounds too narrow: evidently, not all coming-out stories, which typically recount their youthful protagonists' discovery, acceptance and declaration of their homosexuality, share a suburban setting. Other non-metropolitan locations – the provincial small town, or rural environments, for instance – are by no means uncommon.[1] In printed gay male coming-out narratives, however, the suburbs, the solidly family-oriented residential peripheries of towns and cities across the United States, comprise the most frequent principle setting. And, as I will argue in greater detail below, it is in part their apparently ubiquitous suburban location that makes accounts of 'coming out' seem so ordinary, so familiar. Like many suburban stories with adolescent protagonists, though, coming-out stories almost always enact or otherwise entail the evacuation of the hostile suburbs for the more congenial city. Crucially, the narrative trajectory of the coming-out story, which traverses a set of spatial and temporal co-ordinates – from suburb to city, and from childhood or adolescence to the edge of adulthood – forms the parameters of metropolitan gay identity. Put simply, the opposing binary of suburban childhood and gay urban adulthood is mutually defining. But it remains something of a peculiarity of the coming-out story that it dwells so long in the very place that is deemed antithetical to homosexuality. Whilst paradoxical and seemingly unstable, the genre, this chapter will demonstrate, is ultimately productive. For, whilst they frequently do excoriate suburbia and celebrate its evacuation, even the most straightforward of coming-out stories simultaneously work against themselves. That is to say, they are as interested in returning to the suburbs, albeit retrospectively, in order to reclaim something that has been left behind as they are preoccupied with emerging from the suburbs and joining gay urban culture. And what is most often left behind in the suburbs is the figure of

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[1] See for example: Will Fellow's oral history *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996); John Howard's part oral-history, and part-traditional historical study of small-town and rural queers in the American South, *Men Like That: Southern Queer Histories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jim Grimsley's successful novel *Dream Boy* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 1995), set in the rural Deep South; Kirk Reed's self-explanatorily titled memoir *How I Learnt to Snap: A Small-Town Coming-out and Coming-of-age Story* (Athens, GA: Hill Street, 2001), also set in the South, and Brent Hartinger's novel for young adults, *The Geography Club* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). The latter two, however, are set firmly within the ubiquitous milieu of the high school.

the sissy, the effeminate boy. Very much a suburban product, the sissy is not himself gay – for, by definition, he pre-exists gay identity – but is nevertheless recuperated by the coming-out story as a proto-gay hero.

Suburbia and the Production of Gay Identity

I am not the first to identify the manner in which particular locations in space and time define gay identity. Cultural anthropologist Kath Weston, for instance, has demonstrated that metropolitan/non-metropolitan contrasts have played a significant part in constituting gay and lesbian subjectivity, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, a period which witnessed what she calls the 'Great Gay Migration', 'an influx of tens of thousands of lesbians and gay men (as well as individuals bent on "exploring" their sexuality) into major urban areas across the United States.'[2] Weston redeploys Benedict Anderson's understanding of the nation as an 'imagined community', claiming that gay and lesbian identity is based upon an attachment to a 'necessarily fictional' gay and lesbian community.[3] Accordingly, gay men and lesbians 'interpret themselves *through* that attachment, so that their subjectivity becomes inseparable from constructions of "we-ness."'[4]

Anderson has argued that emergent print cultures in the eighteenth century helped enable the development of national identities. In quite the same way, the relative deluge of published coming-out stories from the 1970s onwards can be seen as having strengthened considerably the notion of a gay and lesbian community. The sense of belonging to a subculture located in the city is asserted by the coming-out story and is reinforced by the narrative's continual retelling. 'In story after story', Weston reports, 'a symbolics of urban/rural relations locates gay subjects in the city while putting their presence in the countryside under erasure.'[5] As Toni McNaren suggests, however, one of the most laudable aspects of the coming-out story is its capacity to reach beyond the confines of urban enclaves to provide encouragement to those living in much more precarious circumstances:

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[2] Kath Weston, 'Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration', *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, 2 (1995), 253-77.
[3] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
[4] Weston, 'Get Thee to a Big City', p. 257.
[5] Ibid., p. 262.

Though most large cities in the United States have identifiable centers in which informational and social exchanges occur, much of the rest of the country continues to impose isolation on and exact silence from its lesbian and gay residents. Being able to obtain collections of stories, some of which will narrate exactly the situation in which the reader currently finds himself or herself, can mean the difference between feeling like a part of the world and falling into ever deeper despair and loneliness.[6]

One consequence, though, of the capacity of coming-out stories to help isolated gays and lesbians to feel 'like part of the world' is to encourage the very metropolitan relocation articulated in these narratives, or at least to underline the seemingly necessary connection between living in the city and being part of a successful gay community. Weston characterizes gay men and lesbians as having predominantly *rural* backgrounds. Actually, though, in her work, as elsewhere, there is considerable elision between the categories rural, provincial, suburban and small town. But the compaction of these non-metropolitan spaces simply serves to demonstrate the dominance of the big city in the gay imaginary.

In printed coming-out stories, however, suburbia is the most common initial location, and its ubiquity can be explained in a number of ways. Firstly, since World War II, an increasing number of Americans have lived in such places. According to census figures, by 1970 a plurality, and at the end of the century, a virtual majority of the national population lived in suburbs.[7] The twentieth century has, quite justifiably, been described as the 'suburban century'.[8] Furthermore, in the post-war years, America's demography was dramatically altered by a surge in birth rates. The so-called 'Baby Boom' generation largely sprang from the newly-built suburbs of the 1940s, 50s and 60s. It is therefore unsurprising that biographical writing in the late-twentieth century is dominated by these environments as writers recount their suburban pasts, with coming-out stories being no exception. Secondly, as well as defining the period, the suburbs have come to represent America: more

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[6] Toni A. H. McNaren, 'Coming Out', *glbtq*, 2002, http://www.glbtq.com/literature/coming_out.html [accessed 21 January 2005].
[7] See Jack Rosenthal's commentary on the 1970 US census, '1970: The Year of the Suburbs', in *Suburbia in Transition*, ed. Louis H. Masotti and Jeffrey K. Hadden (New York: New York Times Books, 1974), pp. 248-52. According to the 2000 US Census, the total proportion of the American population living in suburban – or to use it its own terms, those 'living in a metropolitan area' whilst 'not living in [the] central city' – stood at exactly fifty percent. US Census Bureau, 'Urban/Rural and Metropolitan/Nonmetropolitan Population: 2000', 2000, http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GCTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-_box_head_nbr=GCT-P1&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF1_U&-format=US-1 [accessed 15 January 2006].
[8] Mark Clapson states the term was coined as early as 1992. Mark Clapson, *Suburban Century* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), p. 2.

and more often, the US is referred to as a 'suburban nation'.[9] Kenneth T. Jackson opens his influential historical study of American suburbanisation with the following characterization:

> Suburbia has become the quintessential physical achievement of the United States; it is perhaps more representative of its culture than big cars, tall buildings, or professional football. Suburbia symbolizes the fullest, most unadulterated embodiment of contemporary culture; it is a manifestation of such fundamental characteristics of American society as conspicuous consumption, a reliance on the private automobile, upward mobility, the separation of the family into nuclear units, the widening division between work and leisure, and a tendency toward racial and economic exclusiveness.[10]

Over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, the suburb has replaced the small town as the embodiment of 'mainstream', or even 'heartland' America. A suburban upbringing, then, is easily characterized as a quintessentially American experience.[11] Thirdly, those growing up in American suburbs are more able to access the gay city and to achieve gay identity than those of remoter rural communities, and are thus more likely to write coming-out stories. Also, because those growing up in the suburbs are likely to hail from wealthier or aspirant middle-class families in which urban relocation, often for a university education, is frequently both expected and financially supported, coming-out stories do tend to be written by educated, middle-class white men.[12]

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[9] For example, see Andres Duany, Jeff Speck, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the Suburban Dream*, (New York: North Point, 2000).

[10] Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 4.

[11] The relative vastness of North American geography means that coming-out stories from the United States are more likely to be suburb-located than their British counterparts. As Alan Sinfield suggests, Britain being a smaller place, less gay and lesbian people feel it absolutely necessary to move permanently to urban centres than in the United States. Consequently, urban subcultures are 'thinner', and presumably have less gravitational pull on the gay imagination. Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), p. 90.

[12] Often hailed as the 'first black coming-out story', Larry Duplechan's *Blackbird* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986) is not complicated in any significant way by the race of its protagonist, Johnnie Ray Rousseau – nor for that matter, by his working-class background. Indeed, the novel conforms exceedingly to the generic conventions that render it recognizable as a coming-out story. *Blackbird*'s narrative trajectory from suburban-small-town California to Los Angeles parallels Rousseau's educational progress and effectively his middle-class assimilation. Moreover, his urban relocation/academic advancement explicitly lends the novel narrative coherence: in the novel's epilogue Rousseau declares 'I write this from the Gay Students' Union office at U.C.L.A.' (p. 180). By 'this' he could mean simply the book's final chapter, though it would make as much sense if he were referring to the entire novel. For then, each and every episode prior to the denouement is given meaning in terms of how it relates to Rousseau's attainment of gay identity, which is troped in an altogether familiar fashion: 'the first Gay Students' Union meeting of the new term [...] was like the world's biggest homecoming for me' (p. 181). *Blackbird*, then, suggests that the implications of class and race are easily deprioritized in coming-out stories. It is therefore not a sufficient rebuttal of coming-out stories' white, middle-class orientation to indicate black and/or working-class examples (In chapter two, however, I address

Coming-out stories certainly utilize suburbia's assumed universality. Two distinct strategies are used to characterize a suburban upbringing as ubiquitous. In the first, the suburban location is unspecified in order to render the narrator's account commonplace. In Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*, for example, the bland suburban community of the narrator is unnamed, as is the anonymous Midwestern city to which his parents' home is appended, as is indeed his own name: the novel's very title purposefully suggests a gay everyman's narrative, which is facilitated by the novel's indeterminate location.[13] In the second strategy, the writer identifies his home suburb by name and location whilst insisting that his life there was just like everybody else's experience of suburbia. Often these places are portrayed, in all their direness, as the most suburban of suburbs and thereby, somewhat counterproductively, are rendered peculiar. By listing quite exhaustively the familiar markers of suburban inanity John Champagne and Frank DeCaro's autobiographical accounts of their respective upbringings in Greenfield, Wisconsin and Little Falls, New Jersey are typical of this second approach:

> Greenfield. A true suburb. [...] Vacant lots, shopping malls, a gigantic nursing home. Box-shaped buildings, characterless ranch-style homes covered in aluminium siding, flat and rectangular churches and schools indistinguishable from one another. [...] There were no factories in Greenfield, nor any ballet nor opera nor even community theatres. In short, Greenfield was predictably boring.[14]

> We were Jersey people, Marian, Frank Senior, and me, products of the aluminum-sided, lawn-sprinklered, what-exit? wilds of suburbia, genuine dyed-in-the-mall articles.[15]

The positing of 'a true suburb' or a 'genuine' suburban 'product' is, like White's approach, an attempt to express the ubiquity of the narrator's childhood, but it cannot help

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a narrative, albeit in a British context, which appears to engage with questions of class, race and education that are usually evaded or ignored by the conventional coming-out story).

[13] Edmund White, *A Boy's Own Story* (London: Picador, 1983 [1982]). Although not a coming-out story as such, the film *American Beauty* (dir. Sam Mendes, DreamWorks, 1999) seemingly enacts the same strategy. Yet screenwriter Alan Ball has insisted that his story is not about suburbia *per se*; it does not purport to demonstrate how suburban living leads inevitably to familial and personal dysfunction. Rather, the film focuses on the tribulations of one particular man approaching middle age who happens to live in a suburb. Such claims, however, rest uncomfortably with *American Beauty*'s generic setting – the location is unspecified and, as the title suggests, the film lays claim to the same trans-national significance that is often made for suburbs. Alan Ball, '*Beauty* and the Box Office', *Advocate*, 28 March 2000, http://www.advocate.com/html/stories/808/808_ball_persp.asp [accessed 15 April 2003].

[14] John Champagne, 'Greenfield, Wisconsin', in *Hometowns: Gay Men Write about Where They Belong*, ed. John Preston (New York: Plume, 1991), pp. 69-80 (p. 70; subsequent page references given in parentheses).

[15] Frank DeCaro, *A Boy Named Phyllis: A Suburban Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. 3. Subsequent page references given in parentheses.

but suggest that it is also possible to be partially, or even inauthentically, suburban as a result of not having experienced in totality all of the familiar negative aspects of suburbia. Both texts quoted produce suburbia *par excellence* by indicating the absence of attributes associated with the city: for Champagne, suburbia equates not only with bland uniformity but, just as importantly, the absence of the city's industrial and cultural dynamism; for DeCaro, the fundamental suburbanity of his family derives from the fact they are all offspring of the suburbs: 'New Jersey was all my parents knew. My bald-headed teddy-bear-cute father and my pear-shaped bundle of Aqua-Net mother were born and raised only a few minutes' drive from the house where I grew up. That's where they still live' (p. 3). The distillation of a pure suburbanity, a process that combines a litany of commonplaces that invokes the suburbs' most egregious qualities with the subtraction of anything of a metropolitan character, is endemic to coming-out narratives. The effect of the exaggeration of suburbia and the polarization of suburban and urban in these stories is to allow for a more easily justified extrication and transition of the gay subject from one to the other. Coming-out narratives operate using a simple rule of thumb: the more suburban a location is, the less conducive that place is to homosexuality; reciprocally, the more metropolitan a city is, the more like 'home' it will appear in comparison to the protagonist's childhood home.

Suburbia is, then, quite literally a catalyst: it promotes the production of gay identity by encouraging the departure of the adolescent subject, but remains itself fundamentally unchanged. The suburb's immutability in coming-out stories is further reinforced by their temporal location: they are rarely contemporary places, but are almost always located in the past. Since they inevitably culminate in the city and the acquisition of a gay identity, coming-out stories are able to project, in contrast to the hostile suburbs left behind, a rewarding, urban gay future. Even if urban relocation is only described in the final chapter or even the last page of the story, as is often the case, the goal of gay identity stands as a life-long reward, akin to the 'happily ever after' − for instance, walking into the sunset − endings which conclude other popular genres. The suburbs are denied this utopian futurity. Consequently it is hard to imagine the suburbs being transformed in any way. Indeed, it rather seems that the acquisition of gay identity is predicated on the permanent stasis of the suburbs. In each of the coming-out stories discussed in this chapter, the protagonist's childhood is set in a suburb located somewhere between the early 1950s and the late 1980s and is described from an urban present. In text after text, these suburbs of the past are

presented as hostile to both difference and change. Certainly, the positive aspects about suburban life that have begun to attract gay men discussed in the introduction are virtually unthinkable.[16]

The contraposition of suburb and city in coming-out narratives, and the manner in which their polarity helps deliver gay identity, is made perfectly clear in DeCaro's *A Boy Named Phyllis: A Suburban Memoir*, which celebrates the writer's joyous escape from 1970s suburban New Jersey to the 'gay mecca' (p. 4) of Chelsea, New York. His youthful forays into the city allow for an utterly frank exposition of what DeCaro is and where he needs to be. Watching *A Chorus Line* on one of many family trips to Broadway, for instance, DeCaro exclaims:

> I identified with the gay characters, their need to escape unhappy homes and follow their dreams. [...] I howled, more than I should have, I guess, when one said something like 'I thought about committing suicide, but in Buffalo, suicide is redundant.' Yes! I thought.
>
> These shows and these early trips into Manhattan, with their package-deal dinners, gave me a taste of the life I longed to lead. From the moment I saw New York City at night, my face pressed to the windows of that chartered bus, I knew this was where I wanted to be. Here was excitement and energy, instead of the stultifying sameness of suburbia. In the city, there was the comfort of anonymity. No one there knew how often the other kids called me a fag, or spat on me, or tried to stuff me in a locker. The city that my father called a jungle and TV commercials called Fun City was a place where I knew I would feel at home, where I knew there'd be lots of other people like me, even if I didn't know exactly who I was yet. And it couldn't be any more dangerous than walking through the Passaic Valley High School cafeteria, no matter what my father said. (pp. 157-8)

However, physical travel into the city is not strictly necessary to catch a glimpse of gay life. Certain experiences in suburbia transport 'major homosexuals-to-be' to a notional gay urbanity, providing youngsters like DeCaro with their 'psychic ticket out of there' (p. 135). For example, for DeCaro 'Disco, even our afternoon kiddy version, was a link to New York City, and, though I didn't realize it at the time, my first connection to gay culture. It was a tribal drumbeat that lots of not-yet-gay kids heard all over the world.' (pp. 134-5)

These excerpts characterize Frankie's homosexuality as entirely concordant with an exhilarating urbanity. Reciprocally, gayness and suburbia are posited as utterly antithetical,

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[16] Some British coming-out stories, examined in chapter two, differ, in that their suburban settings are contemporary, and correspondingly, these narratives appear or aim to be more optimistic about gay life in suburbia.

the latter rendered dull by parental stolidity and wretched by the interminable homophobia of Frankie's straight peers. DeCaro even goes as far as stating that gayness cannot exist outside the city. With only a few slips, DeCaro insists on referring to his childhood and early adolescent self as 'not-yet-gay'. Of an early relationship with another boy, DeCaro comments that they had no word for themselves and what they shared: 'We had no gay identity then, no sense of a gay community existing beyond the world we knew in Little Falls' (pp. 184).

This necessary conjunction of urbanity, gay community and gay identity forms the most fundamental equation of the standard coming-out story. Without one element, the other two are unable to exist in tandem; indeed, they are virtually unimaginable. Yet this tripartite conjunction foregrounds the contrary nature of the conventional coming-out narrative. Whilst deigning to give an account of the experience of growing up gay, these stories spend virtually all of their time in the one place where gayness is least able to exist. For example, for all the expressed distaste for Little Falls, New Jersey, along with the many attempts to distance gay identity from suburbia, *A Boy Named Phyllis* devotes most of its pages to DeCaro's experiences of his hometown. The memoir's dedication seems to give some clue in answering this apparent contradiction: 'To my mother and father, Marian and Frank DeCaro, without whom this book would not have been possible ... or necessary' (p. v). The author both honours his parents for bringing him into world and providing sustenance and genuine love, but simultaneously accuses them of being ill-equipped to raise a child destined to grow up gay. Marian and Frank DeCaro Senior's difficulties in rearing a child like Frank are explained by the fact that they too are born of Little Falls: their outlook and expectations are limited by having always lived in a quintessential American suburb. The conventional coming-out story, located wholly within the suburbs, is a narrative of individual struggle. Not being born into his own subculture, the adolescent who is growing up gay must find his way out of the suburbs to a more inviting setting with no positive help from his parents. The 'necessity' of writing a book like *A Suburban Memoir*, then, appears to be in the articulation of the agonies and confusion of emerging out of an uncomprehending or hostile environment. Retelling the story from a happily gay – and of course urban – perspective reorganizes and renders coherent the experiences of isolation and emotional pain. In short, the culminating achievement of gay identity makes all that adolescent suffering worthwhile.

Given the coming-out story's apparent function of making adolescence intelligible, by positioning it as a state which pre-exists gay identity, it would be reasonable to expect that all such narratives *inevitably* conclude in the city, as do Champagne's and DeCaro's autobiographical accounts. Esther Saxey asserts, however, that straightforward depictions of the relocation of the protagonist to urban communities in gay male fictional coming-out stories are actually rare; the trope is much more typical of lesbian narrative.[17] But as Saxey concedes, the flight of gay men from the family is often enacted symbolically. Excursions to the city – and if not to the city, then to some more 'natural' littoral or sylvan environment – where social and sexual encounters with other gay men take place much more freely, usually suggest a future, permanent relocation.[18] For instance, White's *A Boy's Own Story* does not conclude with its teenage narrator-protagonist moving to the city; indeed, the novel ends with his betrayal, in his suburban preparatory school, of a teacher who obviously has had some contact with an urban queer milieu. However, the lure of the metropolis is shown to be something inevitable, a kind of irresistible magnetism. In one scene the boy wanders the streets of his city alone, something he is said almost never to do without being escorted by his parents 'like a prisoner'.[19] Two apparently gay men he encounters are seemingly very aware of the boy's sexuality, even if he is himself only on the cusp of self-realization. Yet physical contact with one of the men explicitly drives the boy centripetally: 'The man's embrace around the waist sent me spinning like a dancer across the darkened stage of the city; my turns led me to Fountain Square, the center.' (p. 45)

Similarly, in Richard McCann's *Mother of Sorrows*, largely set in the new subdivisions of 1950s Washington D.C, the unnamed gay male narrator recounts a trip made in childhood that hints at a future gay life. The description of the dream-like journey quite specifically suggests departure from a confining and unpromising suburban domesticity. The boy is driven 'past ranch houses tethered to yards by chain-link fences [...] past a bulldozed red-clay field where a weathered billboard advertised, IF YOU LIVED HERE, YOU'D BE

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[17] Some examples include Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* (Plainfield, VT: Daughters, inc., 1973), which moves from the rural Deep South to New York City; Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (London: Pandora, 1985) (Lancashire mill town to Oxford); Ann Bannon's *Beebo Brinker* (New York: Fawcett, 1962) (small-town Indiana to Greenwich Village).

[18] Esther Saxey, 'Homoplot: The Coming out Story as Sexual Identity Narrative' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2003), pp. 78-84.

[19] Edmund White, *A Boy's Own Story*, p. 46. Subsequent page references to this text given in parentheses.

HOME BY NOW'.[20] His destination is a city nightclub, 'a cocktail lounge in the basement of a shabbily elegant hotel', as tawdry yet charming as many a gay venue. Like a young gay man taking his first anxious steps in a gay club, the boy is unsure of the script, and lets himself be guided by what he imagines Shirley Temple and Judy Garland – redoubtable gay icons – would have done in the same circumstances. He even ends up lip-synching on stage in the time-honoured manner of a drag queen (pp. 12-3).

Whilst appearing to be premonitions of a future gay life in the city, foretelling the inevitable conclusion of the coming-out story, these two visions of the child in the city also provide a short cut through the coming-out narrative's dilatory aspects. There is, according to White and McCann, *in some sense a more direct and pressing connection between gay* urban subculture and the child born outside it than the simple fact that the latter will join the former when he is ready or able to do so. The child's instinct for where to go and what to say and the eerie sense that he is being watched over by gay deities suggests an interaction between childhood and gay adulthood that is inevitable as it is necessary. In short, whilst describing or implying the relief that comes with the evacuation of suburbia, a second, potentially more radical function of the coming-out story is to *reconnect* gay subculture with its lost childhood, and by doing so strengthening and broadening gay identities.

Reintegrating Homosexual Adolescence and the Reclamation of Effeminacy

So far, I have suggested two approaches to assessing suburbia's part in the production of gay identity. The first takes the city's suburban antithesis as constitutive of everything that is not gay. By virtue of their narrativity, coming-out stories that start in the suburbs and end in the city reify gayness. This binary approach is analogous to that of being closeted and being 'out'. As theorists such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have argued, being 'out' is inescapably circumscribed by the closet. Butler contends that in coming out of the closet, one does not find oneself in some 'new unbounded spatiality'; rather, 'being "out" always depends to some extent on being "in"; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being "out" must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain

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[20] Richard McCann, *Mother of Sorrows* (New York: Pantheon, 2005), pp. 11-2; subsequent page references to this text given in parenthesis.

itself as "out."[21] Similarly, any narrated avowal of gay identity is unintelligible without reference to a prior repudiation, state of ignorance or conflict attendant on the fact that (virtually) no one is brought up to be gay. As Edmund White suggests, coming out is a 'rite [of] passage' and a 'transition':[22] the single act can only be understood by what precedes it and by what – or, rather, who – comes after.

White, however, seeks to distance himself from this strict binary model of gay identity, offering instead an alternative approach which emphasizes what the gay adult and child have in common, rather than what distinguishes them. White compacts early sexual feelings and subsequent sexual identities because he perceives their integration to be progressive:

> Many men recollect homosexual desires amongst their earliest childhood memories, although they often attempt to keep those longings separate, in quarantine or between parentheses. Acknowledging homosexual desires and integrating them into a larger notion of the self is the first bold act of gay fiction, whether written or whispered.[23]

Yet, it is this very bracketing of early sexuality that defines adult sexual identity in the first place. By narrating a childhood in which homosexuality was disavowed, the conventional coming-out story reifies gay identity. Hence, paradoxically, the strategies that White contrasts are potentially one and the same: since gay identity can only be understood narratively, to parenthesize early sexual memories is precisely to integrate them, to use his phrase, 'into a larger notion of the self'; this 'larger' 'self' is still predicated on the difference between childhood and adulthood, or more specifically, on the disavowal of earlier disavowals. In order to be comfortable with this conceptualization of subjectivity one is required to accept a history that includes the occasional volte-face, the one-off identity transition.

In any case, as suggested above in the discussion of *A Boy Named Phyllis*, coming-out stories do not quarantine early memories; indeed, such narratives are typically dominated by childhood and adolescence, in terms of the proportion of the text given over to those life stages anterior to adulthood. Furthermore, the latter stage, adulthood, typically constitutes only the denouement of the coming-out story. So there is no case to be heard that conventional accounts of gay identity ignore early sexual feelings and experiences (perhaps

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[21] Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 13-31), p. 16.
[22] *The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction*, ed. Edmund White (London and Boston, Faber, 1991), p. ix.
[23] Ibid., pp. ix-x.

White can himself take some of the credit for the coming-out story's emphasis on early childhood, with the widespread success and influence of his novel *A Boy's Own Story*). Yet, despite taking up far more narrative space, childhood and adolescence are still only given meaning by the eventual achievement of adulthood, in quite the same way as adult gay identity is defined by a prior disavowal of homosexuality. As Angus Gordon asserts:

> Just as being out of the closet always depends to some extent on being in, so being in always depends on being out, in that closetedness can be represented only from the retrospective position of outness: one must be out of the closet to recognize it as the space from which one has emerged. This necessary retrospectivity has important implications for the representation of closeted adolescence [...], since it consigns adolescence to a particular stage within an overarching narrative, namely, a problematic or compromised 'middle' stage whose signification becomes apparent only from the perspective of the narrative's 'denouement'.[24]

This 'necessary retrospectivity' is more generally a feature of twentieth-century discourse on the adolescent, whose significance 'is always understood to become apparent in hindsight; it is structured throughout by a foreshadowed denouement, which is the subject's arrival at adulthood.' The normative narrative of adolescence, the coming-of-age tale, or the *bildungsroman* perhaps, characterizes this arrival by, amongst other things, the inception into heterosexuality. In relation to this culminating maturity, all prior deviations, such as teenage homosexuality – 'it's just a phase' – are rendered as simply that: diversions with minimal significance.

But if Butler's seems the more coherent of the two models, White's has more political utility. Any attempt to recuperate childhood and adolescence by gay subjects using Butler's avowedly binaristic approach – for example, in order to address teenage homophobia – will be hampered by the seemingly unintelligible designation 'gay child', or even 'gay youth'. Simply, such terms are oxymoronic; adulthood is a necessary condition for gay identity.[25] In spite of the potential inconsistency, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick boldly claims that 'everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents.'[26] In

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[24] Angus Gordon, 'Turning Back: Adolescence, Narrative, and Queer Theory', in *GLQ*, 5 (1999), 1-24 (pp. 2-3).

[25] For Butler the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' are themselves already 'category mistakes', incorporating both avowal and disavowal of homosexuality. Nevertheless, they are strategically necessary, being important tools for which to 'rally and represent an oppressed political constituency' (Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in *Inside/Out*, ed. Fuss, p. 16.). 'Gay child', then, is a *double* misnaming, which disavows its own disavowal of homosexuality. But then, as we shall see, 'gay youth' represents a marginalized element within a marginalized constituency; the term, therefore, is of particularly acute strategic significance.

[26] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

so doing, she insists on what Gordon refers to (using Gayatri Spivak's term) as a 'catachrestic' approach: 'a kind of naming that is necessarily a misnaming but that nevertheless must take place':

> The ability of anyone in the culture to support and honor gay kids may depend on an ability to name them as such, notwithstanding the fact that many gay adults may never have been gay kids and some gay kids may not turn into gay adults. It seems plausible that a lot of the emotional energy behind essentialist historical work has to do not even in the first place with reclaiming the place and eros of Homeric heroes, Renaissance painters, and medieval gay monks, so much as with the far less permissible, vastly more necessary project of recognizing and validating the creativity and heroism of the effeminate boy or tommish girl of the fifties (or sixties or seventies or eighties) whose sense of constituting a *gap* in the discursive fabric of the given has not jet been done justice, so far, by constructivist work.[27]

One way of sidestepping or compensating for the catachresis of 'gay youth' is the replacement of signifiers of sexuality for ones of gender, as demonstrated by Sedgwick here. For whilst it has been frequently argued – foremost by Sedgwick herself – that it is impossible to conceive of the twentieth-century Western subject outside a framework that includes both sexuality and gender (without them the subject would be unintelligible, would 'dangle'), Gordon notes that, actually, 'the intelligibility of the subject is in part constituted as the effect of a diachronic interval between the assumption of sex and gender, on the one hand, and that of sexual orientation, in the other.'[28] Unlike sexuality, gender can be discursively constructed from infancy (by the completion of the sentence 'it's a boy/girl!' if not before), instead of being necessarily held in abeyance until adulthood; 'sexual orientation, as a predicate, is susceptible to a constitutive "delay."'[29]

Elsewhere, Sedgwick warns that the eclipse of the effeminate boy by gay adults represents far 'more than a damaging theoretical gap': the sissy's relegation to the position of the 'haunting abject' potentially constitutes 'a node of annihilating homophobic, gynephobic, and pedophobic hatred internalized and made central to gay-affirmative analysis.'[30] Yet, it is precisely 'the creativity and heroism of the effeminate boy' that a seeming majority of male coming-out stories aim to recover and celebrate. The ubiquitous

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[27] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 42-3.
[28] Gordon, ibid., p. 4.
[29] Ibid., p. 5.
[30] Sedgwick, 'How to Bring Your Kids up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys', in *Tendencies*, pp. 154-64 (p. 158).

protagonist of the genre, the 'sissy boy', is a proto-gay hero, by virtue of his defiance – or survival – of the gender norms of heterosexual society. Despite Sedgwick's anxieties to the contrary, the sissy, though himself not-yet-gay, is nevertheless produced and consumed as a celebrated figure by gay culture. Accounts of sissies still culminate with their transformation into proud gay men – a kind of ugly duckling narrative. But unlike the latter tale, where the juvenile's abjectness is redeemed only by the grace and freedom of adulthood (the glorious swan flies the nest), a degree of pride is taken in the sissy's evident difference. In this respect, a strong connection can be forged between the sissy and the gay man: their outness, the former in terms of his gender difference and the latter in terms of his sexuality. So whilst the closet does indeed continue to help to produce gay identity – that is, gay adulthood is defined by the manner in which it is different from adolescence – the gay man is subsequently able to reconnect with his own childhood through an appreciation of what he has in common with his younger self.

To indicate the common ground between the effeminate boy and the gay adult is not to equate their subjective experiences, however. For the corollary of being 'out' for the sissy is not so clear cut as it is for the gay man. DeCaro makes a clear distinction between being visibly gay and visibly effeminate: 'At thirteen or fifteen or even twenty, I wasn't comfortable with being openly gay, not like now, even though I'd always put the "boy" into "flamboyant" as a child.' (p. 111) The child is likely to hide the fact of his homosexuality; the adult, by contrast, is able to be open about it. Effeminacy, though, takes considerably greater effort to conceal, as gendered behaviour is frequently manifest at a corporal level. 'Passing' is sometimes possible but always a continued challenge; indeed, many sissy characters attempt instead strategies of self-effacement in order to avoid drawing attention to their difference in the first place (e.g., John Champagne: 'I tended at times to behave as if I wanted to erase my physical presence. I walked with a slight shuffle, my head bowed slightly to the ground so that I appeared even shorter than my five-foot-six-inch stature.' (p. 76)). Ultimately though, some physical facts are simply impossible to conceal – like the recurrent theme of always being picked last for sports, for example, seemingly a necessary condition of sissiness. Duplechan offers a particularly compelling portrait of the effeminate boy's agonies in the gym class, which even includes his protagonist's invocation of 'the Patron Saint of Sissies' to come to his aid when in some far-flung outfield position, to

'render me a miracle and allow me to catch the ball'.[31] Interestingly for the purposes of identifying the differences between the sissy boy and the gay man, Duplechan explains how 'the residual bitterness of what seemed like several lifetimes' of the special brand of humiliation America seems to reserve for the nonathletic boy' (p. 118) fuels his metamorphosis from ineffectual adolescence into muscular adulthood. Rousseau's re-engineering of his body in the privacy of his bedroom is motivated by his acute awareness of the organization of masculine attractiveness: 'you know: football players and baseball players and whateverball players [...] God, the energy I have expended envying those guys, wishing I was like them [...] Hating them. But wanting them, too [...] And I know I'm not like them, I'll never in my life be like them, but I can try to at least look like them. Beautiful.' (pp. 119-20) Gay body culture, Duplechan suggests, is motivated by a desire to appropriate normative scripts of masculinity. The sissy is inevitably abandoned in the process of creating a desirable body – and yet – is retained as an incorporated presence, providing an emotional connection with an effeminate childhood self.

The relative conspicuousness of effeminacy is further exacerbated by the very built environment typical of the sissy's suburban habitat. In Richard McCann's *Mother of Sorrows*, which depicts the childhood and adolescence of an overtly effeminate boy growing up in the newly built subdivisions which were springing up around Washington D.C. in the 1950s, the suburban architecture is transparent from every possible angle, affording residents a total absence of privacy:

> Like every corner house in Carroll Knolls, the corner house on our block was turned backward on its lot, a quirk introduced by the developer of the subdivision, who, having run short of money, sought variety without additional expense. The turned-around houses, as we kids called them, were not popular, perhaps because they seemed too public, their casement bedroom windows cranking open onto sunstruck asphalt streets. In actuality, it was the rest of the houses that were public, their picture windows offering dioramic glimpses of early-American sofas and Mediterranean-style pole lamps with mottled globes hanging like iridescent melons from wrought-iron chains. (p. 7)

In such an exposed environment – the starkness of the brand-new subdivision being exacerbated by the absence of any tree cover – effeminacy stands as a coruscating fact, impossible to hide. The narrator's first sense of his new next-door neighbour Denny's difference is after a glimpse of his bicycle, which loudly proclaims its owner's sissiness

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[31] Duplechan, *Blackbird*, p. 118.

like a flag: 'a wire basket bolted over its thick rear tires, brightly colored plastic streamers dangling from its handlebars.' (p. 8) Similarly, the narrator's own effeminacy, and in particular, his worshipful relationship with his mother, declares itself. Denny's mother's first response to the narrator on meeting him is to query the object he holds, 'a scallop shell spray-painted gold, with imitation pearls along its edges.' '"A hat pin tray," I said. "It's for my mother."' (p. 8)

Robert Rodi opens his short story 'Mister Kenny: A Memoir' with a re-evaluation of contemporary America's perception of post-war suburbs, stating:

> The current reputation of sixties suburbia as a paradise of homogeneity for middle-class nuclear families is a bit off the mark. I lived in one such suburb, Sherwood Village, a development outside Chicago where all the houses were new and all the trees were saplings. And while the cookie-cutter division of blocks and lots was indeed designed to accommodate as many Mom-Pop-Junior-Sis incursions as possible, anomalies persisted. In Sherwood Village there were two short, blocky apartment buildings where dwelt some older widows and widowers, a few retirees, and some younger families of dubious quality. And Mister Kenny.[32]

However, it rather seems these 'anomalies' simply prove the homogenous rule. Indeed, those who do not conform to the nuclear norm are housed together in two buildings whose architecture announces – and contains – their residents' deviation from the standard family unit that organizes the rest of the subdivision. Certainly, the apartment buildings' peculiarity serves to focus attention on any eccentricities of the people dwelling there, such as the effeminate old bachelor Mister Kenny. As Rodi recounts, 'we kids [...] were inevitably attracted to something so patently odd. (A man, gardening? In a *lady's hat*?)'[33] Suburbia, then – particularly in the form of the newly-built subdivisions of post-war America – typically clarifies effeminacy.

Arguably, the suburbs' role in the production of effeminacy might be expected. The American suburb (again, particularly the newly built suburb of the late 1940s to 1960s) is often presumed to be a feminine realm, the domain of the housewife, a place characterized by domesticity and childrearing with breadwinning husbands and fathers away at work during the day. Many suburban-set coming-out stories do evoke the dominating presence of the mother and the absent father. For example, in David Leavitt's 'Territory', the

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[32] Robert Rodi, 'Mister Kenny: A Memoir', in *Reclaiming the Heartland: Lesbian and Gay Voices from the Midwest*, ed. Karen Lee Osborne and William J. Spurlin (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 39-43 (p. 39).
[33] Ibid., p. 39.

protagonist recalls that when he came out to his parents, his 'father hung back, silent; he was absent for that moment as he was mostly absent – a strong absence';[34] in McCann's *Mother of Sorrows*, the narrator's apparent over-identification with his mother prompts his father of few words to engage in some rather emotionless father-son bonding (pp. 22-3). However, suburban coming-out stories avoid proffering unbalanced parental attention in childhood as a cause of sissiness, or indeed, of homosexuality. Neither do sissies particularly find succour or support in the supposedly feminine space of the suburban home – except perhaps for periodic opportunities for transvestite self-expression in the boudoirs of their mothers (e.g., McCann's narrator and his partner-in-crime Denny, and also Keith McDermott's Frankie, who devises numerous personae for himself out of the contents of his mother's summer wardrobe and Avon case[35]). As suggested, the perceived transparency of suburban homes and environments means there are few hiding places to be found. In any case, masculine and patriarchal power structures pervade suburbia. As Susan Faludi argues, the diurnal absence of adult men from the land of cul-de-sacs hardly conceals which gender is the more privileged:

> In the aspiring middle-class suburb where I came of age [in the late 1950s and early 1960s], there was no mistaking the belief in the boy's preeminence; it was evident in the solicitous attentions of parents and schoolteachers, in the centrality of coaches and Cub Scouts and Little League, in the community life that revolved around boys' contests and boys' championships and boys' scores – as if these outposts of tract-home America had been built mainly as exhibition rings for junior male achievement, which perhaps they had. It was evident in the periodic rampages of suburban boys that always seemed to go unchecked, the way they tore up the lawns with their minibikes or hurled rocks at newcomers with impunity or tormented the girls at the public swimming pool; inherent in their behaviour was the assumption that this was their birthright – to be imperial bullies over their miniature dominions. To grow up as a girl in this era was to look on with envy, and to see the boy as being automatically entitled and powerful. Surely when we were grown, he would have the control. He would dispense the gifts. The boys believed that too.[36]

In the few examples of suburban-set coming-out stories which feature non-sissy protagonists, masculine privilege is assumed and enjoyed in quite the manner described by Faludi. Felice Picano's memoir *Ambidextrous: The Secret Lives of Children*, set in the

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[34] David Leavitt, 'Territory', in *Family Dancing* (London: Abacus, 1999 [1984]), p. 6.
[35] Keith McDermott, 'Sweet Thing', in David Bergman (ed.) *Men on Men 7* (New York: Plume, 1998), pp. 282-92.
[36] Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man* (New York: William Morrow, 1999), pp. 24-5.

newly built suburbs of 1950s Long Island, New York, captures well the casual superciliousness of adolescent boys:

> We rode around light as air looking for stickball games to win, boys to fight or befriend, small gaggles of girls to jeer at or assault – four bikes can cause instant havoc in the largest of girls' groups around a jump rope. Every park, schoolyard, empty lot and soda shop in a ten-mile radius was our domain. We ruled it indifferently [with] a superiority born of our special qualities.[37]

The protagonist of Edmund White's *The Beautiful Room is Empty* makes a contrary claim to Faludi: suburbia is not dominated by masculine but feminine privilege. White's narrator does, however, make an explicit distinction between homosexual effeminacy and the *feminization* of heterosexual men as a consequence of their suburban lives. The older incarnation of the effeminate child of *A Boy's Own Story* is as repulsed by the sexless, domesticated world of his parents as he feels attracted to the gay world of the city:

> Something wild and free in me didn't want to give into them, the big baggy grown-ups. No, if I were perfectly honest [...], I'd have to admit that there was a world run by women and feminized men (not effeminate but feminized men) that I wanted to escape, the world of mild suburban couples, his and her necks equally thick and creased, their white hair similarly cropped. The hard hot penis I grabbed for under the toilet-stall partition or the slow wink of a drag queen looking back at me over her ratty fox neckpiece just before she turned the corner – these glimpses piqued my craving for freedom, despite my yearning after respectability. (pp. 121)

Effeminacy, here represented by the drag queen, arguably the most notorious figure of homosexual subculture, suggests a means of escaping the parental propriety of suburbia. But whether one is inclined towards Faludi's or White's account of which gender holds sway, the suburbs are clearly no place for sissies.

Potentially, any validation of suburban effeminacy risks confirming the often proclaimed equation between male homosexuality and an essential femininity. The ubiquity of the effeminate boy in the conventional coming-out story seems to be a reformulation of the antique theory of the 'third sex', which interprets homosexuals as female souls in male bodies. For the sissy's effeminacy, manifest so early in life, seems like a natural state, rather than a kind of behaviour that is learnt or formed through social pressures. Indeed, one early victory for the gay liberation movement in the US – which saw the delisting of

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[37] Felice Picano, *Ambidextrous: The Secret Lives of Children* (New York: Haworth, 2003 [1985]), p. 73.

homosexuality as a psychological disorder by the American Psychological Association (ASA) in 1973 – arguably had the effect of creating narrative space for the depiction of 'healthy' homosexuals in gay fiction. James Levin argues:

> After 1973 only an occasional novel contained gay male characters who were female-identified, and even those who had effeminate features were a vanishing breed in American fiction. Gay characters who were pathological or whose orientation was caused by a dominant mother became rare. Most of the gay male characters were shown to be ordinarily healthy. Science conceded that no definitive cause of homosexuality could be established, and many novelists clearly felt that the question was irrelevant or useless.[38]

In Levin's overview of the fiction of that decade, however, 'ordinarily healthy' tends to correlate with 'overtly masculine'. Levin claims that athletic homosexual characters began to feature in a number of novels, including stories set in suburban high schools. This switching of piano lessons for track and field suggests less a new confidence and pride than a residual anxiety around the gendering of homosexuality. Understandably enough, the athletic protagonists of 1970s gay novels indicate a desire to disprove the age-old homophobic presumption of the equivalence between homosexuality and effeminacy. But by deploying characters whose gendered behaviour is as conspicuous as that of the sissy, albeit of a conformist rather than unconventional mode, these stories show homosexuality to be still bonded to considerations of effeminacy. The sissy may have been displaced from the pages of liberation novels of the 1970s, but his absence constructs the figures he is replaced by.

Indeed, as Sedgwick has argued, the depathologizing of homosexuality in the early 1970s was not the total victory that it is usually presumed to be. The ASA's subsequent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, published in 1980, included the additional diagnosis 'Gender Identity Disorder in Childhood'. Popular concerns about childhood effeminacy led to a raft of titles such as Richard Green's The 'Sissy Boy Syndrome' and the Development of Homosexuality. (Comparatively little, however, was published about gender dysphoria

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[38] James Levin, *The Gay Novel in America* (New York: Garland, 1991), p. 245. Richard Dyer notes that in the 1970s, gay texts consciously deployed images 'macho' gay men, citing two American films as examples, Boys in the Band (1970) and A Different Story (1978). 'Seen to Be Believed: Some Problems in the Representation of Gay People as Typical', in *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 19-51 (pp. 40-2). 'Macho', however, differs markedly from 'athletic': as Dyer observes, the former is overtly erotic and performative (indeed, a kind of drag performance) (ibid.); 'athletic', by contrast, connotes naturality, purity and (national) health.

amongst girls.)[39] Sedgwick identifies a subtle relocation of homophobic discourse and insists that, whilst many in the psychiatric profession were sympathetic to the campaign to depathologize adult homosexuality,[40] they evinced a continued hostility towards childhood effeminacy that could only be explained by 'the therapists' disavowed desire for a nongay outcome', which amounted to 'a medicalized dream of the prevention of gay bodies'.[41] Worse, by preferring to concentrate on the destigmatization of non-standard sexual object-choice, with the de-emphasis of the connections with childhood effeminacy springing mostly from the 'conceptual need of the gay movement to interrupt a long tradition of viewing gender and sexuality as continuous and collapsible categories', even the most political of gay activists were in danger of being complicit with American psychiatry's new homophobic turn.[42]

Broadly, however, gay writers are not guilty of favouring masculine characters. Levin is only able to find two novels from the 1970s featuring athletic adolescent homosexual protagonists, and neither is written by a gay male author: Patricia Nell Warren's still popular *The Front Runner*, published in 1974, and Laura Hobson's *Consenting Adult*, published the year after.[43] In Levin's subsequent overview of gay fiction of the 1980s, sissy narratives appear to flood the market again, starting with White's *A Boy's Own Story* in 1982.[44] Yet whilst he criticizes Merle Miller's *What Happened*, about the growing pains of an effeminate boy – published a decade previous – as something of a throwback to the dark days of the 'Freudian fifties' and the pre-war era when gender confusion was the primary framework for understanding homosexuality, Levin absolves White's novel and its contemporaries of the same, apparently retrograde, preoccupation with effeminacy.[45]

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[39] Richard Green, *The 'Sissy Boy Syndrome' and the Development of Homosexuality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

[40] Richard C. Friedman, for instance, writes of his friendships with adult gay men at considerable length. Typically, however, these men are of the 'well adjusted' variety, such as Tim, who was 'burly, strong, and could work side by side with anyone at the most strenuous jobs': 'gregarious and likeable', 'an excellent athlete', Tim was 'captain of [his high school] wrestling team and editor of the school paper.' Richard C. Friedman, *Male Homosexuality: A Contemporary Psychoanalytic Perspective* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), pp 206-7, cited in Sedgwick, 'How to Bring Your Kids up Gay', p. 155.

[41] Sedgwick, ibid., p. 161, 164.

[42] Ibid., p. 157.

[43] Patricia Nell Warren, *The Front Runner* (New York: Morrow, 1974); Laura Hobson, *Consenting Adult* (New York: Doubleday, 1975).

[44] At least, White's novel is by far the best known; Will Aitken's *Reflections of a Rock Lobster* (Boston, MA: Alyson, 1981), published a year earlier, is the story of a gay high school student who takes his principal to court after is denied the opportunity to take his boyfriend to the graduation ball. John Fox's *Boys on the Rock* (New York: St Martin's, 1984) stands out in the 1980s as a coming-out novel featuring athletic protagonists.

[45] Merle Miller, *What Happened* (New York: Harper, 1972); Levin, *The Gay Novel in America*, p. 261.

The protagonists of coming-out narratives from 1980 onwards cast doubt upon, or at least appear unconcerned about, the implications of a naturalized homosexual effeminacy. Firstly, it seems that by adulthood, most gay men in these stories are able to adapt to different forms of behaviour (though some narrators complain bitterly that gay urban subcultures simply impose new and equally oppressive gendered codes of behaviour – such texts will be examined below). Secondly, many coming-out stories insist that the connection between gender and sexuality is made and imposed by others. The coupling of effeminacy and homosexuality is a routine method of maintaining masculine and heterosexual authority in suburban society. Only latterly – i.e., after having left suburbia – do gays adopt effeminacy as a kind of reverse discourse, celebrating the sissy's difference as they do their own separateness as a subculture.

Certainly, coming-out stories are littered with the rules and regulations of the correct forms of gendered deportment, commandments which are as eagerly enforced by little boys and girls as by adults. Whilst Edmund White suggests in *The Beautiful Room is Empty* that effeminacy is an attractive alternative to a feminized suburbia, in the preceding novel *A Boy's Own Story*, which examines the same narrator's experiences of growing up in a Midwestern suburb, the protagonist is undeniably sissified and very much feels himself to be at the sharp end of the schoolyard policing of gender:

> A popular quiz for masculinity in those days asked three questions, all of which I flunked: (1) Look at your nails (a girl extends her fingers, a boy cups his in his in his upturned palm); (2) Look up (a girl lifts just her eyes, a boy throws back his whole head); (3) Light a match (a girl strikes away from her body, a boy toward – or perhaps the reverse, I can't recall). But there were less esoteric signs as well. A man crosses his legs by resting an ankle on his knee; a sissy drapes one leg over the other. A man never gushes; men are either silent or loud. I didn't know how to swear: I always said the final *g* in *fucking* and I didn't know where in the sentence to place *damn* or *hell*. (p. 9)

Clearly, 'sissy' and 'man' are as distinct, exclusive categories as 'boy' and 'girl'. Hence here the early pillorying of sissy children by their peers is underwritten by an awareness of the normative path of development into adulthood, as alluded to above by Faludi. Certainly, elsewhere, there is an understanding of homosexuality's association with effeminacy, despite the almost certain absence of expressions of sexuality in the pre-adolescent school environment. In his account of his suburban schooldays in the commuter town of Wakefield, Massachusetts, Paul Gambone describes the following commandments as

'evidence of homophobia': '"Don't wear a pink shirt on Thursday"; "Don't carry your books against your chest if you're a guy."'[46]

The examples above given by Gambone are described as occasional phenomena. More typically, sissy-baiting is as interminable as it is vindictive. And with caustic efficiency, the equivalence between effeminacy and homosexuality is boiled down to a three-letter barb: 'fag'. John Champagne is so bitter about the place where he grew up, Greenfield, Wisconsin, that he erases any reference to it on the bibliographical summary on the back of his first novel. Reconsidering it in print for the first time, he recalls how 'It wasn't the dullness of Greenfield that made me hate it so': 'Greenfield was also the place where I heard myself called a fag over and over again, from the time I was eight until I turned eighteen and moved to an apartment in Milwaukee.' (pp. 70-1)

Once again, the narrator's difference, his effeminacy, is not self-revelatory. In order to understand the significance of his own behaviour, he must be educated by those who hold a more privileged position in the gendered order: 'Greenfield had taught me that my differences from other boys – the fact that I did well in school, that I loved playing the piano, that I hated sports, that most of my friends were girls – these differences made me a fag.' Once again, also, the connection between effeminacy and homosexuality is not made first by the narrator himself (nor is the narrator in any way interested in any 'scientific' explanation for the association). Yet, as Champagne contends, effeminacy may still be constitutive of gayness: just as the suburbs inform the sissy of his difference, they also help produce a future gay identity:

> I'm not sure what the relationship is between my sexuality and the fact that I was considered by my peers to be 'effeminate.' I'm not sure that there is any relationship at all. What does intrigue me is the possibility that, were it not for the fact of being called a fag with such regularity, I might not recognize myself as gay today. [...] I'm not suggesting that I wouldn't still have sexual feelings for other men, regardless of what I was called by others. But there is a world of difference between sleeping with other men and identifying oneself as a gay person. Culture's insidious equating of gender and sexuality not only leads gay men to be perceived as effeminate; it also allows for an identity to be constructed through that equation. In providing me with this identity – fag – an identity based primarily on my (unintentional) refusal of gender norms, Greenfield in some sense made possible my eventual recognition of myself as gay. (p. 71)

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[46] Philip Gambone, 'Wakefield, Massachusetts', in *Hometowns*, ed. Preston, pp. 81-96 (p. 88).

Hence, as awful as his experience of Greenfield was, Champagne has something to be thankful of his suburban home for: it helped him become gay. Indeed, Champagne acknowledges that 'No matter how much I may disdain Greenfield, it will always be part of me.' Champagne's admission that Greenfield is constitutive of his gay identity is stronger than Angus Gordon's explanation of the way a closeted or abject adolescence defines gay adulthood. In Gordon's account of the coming-out story, childhood and gay identity define and give each other meaning by virtue of a number of binary oppositions: shame verses pride; being 'out' verses being closeted; and, I would add, suburban versus urban. But again, Champagne's account illustrates not that he makes sense of his present self by the manner in which it is different to his previous experience as an adolescent, but that he sees his adult identity to have a vital and *positive* connection with his childhood. Once again, the progression from effeminate child to gay man can only be understood retrospectively. Similarly, the celebration of sissiness and the pride taken in effeminacy can only take effect in adulthood. Champagne continues:

> The funny thing about being called a fag, this hybrid identity that ridicules one's lack of masculinity as well as one's sexual preferences, was that it hurt me most when it couldn't possibly be naming sexual behaviour [...] Yet, once I was actually having sex with men, being called a fag no longer bothered me [...] The word began to sound like an affirmation rather than an insult. (p. 73)

Only after he is able to take pleasure in his difference – usually through sexual contact – can the protagonist of the coming-out story take pride in his difference, either in terms of his effeminacy or his sexuality. Certainly, there are very few instances of sissy children who draw strength from their own effeminacy. Sedgwick instructs gay and lesbian academics to recognize and validate the 'heroism of the effeminate boy', but the lives of the sissies recounted in the coming-out stories in this chapter reveal instead continued bouts of cowardice, duplicity and shame. The sissy's lack of pride in his effeminacy need not be disappointing, though. Arguably, the sissy's very survival of suburbia is in itself a tremendous act of will. To recognize and validate the heroism of the effeminate boy, then, is to recognize and validate the effeminate boy. The affirmation of the sissy is one of the crucial functions of the coming-out story, and the genre demonstrates the desire to recuperate childhood by gay subculture. The very title of DeCaro's memoir, *A Boy Named Phyllis*, captures succinctly the drive for reclaiming the sissy. The nickname 'Phyllis', it is revealed right at the end of the memoir, is only bestowed on Frank in late adolescence by

his first boyfriend, in imitation of the girls' names jokily used by their idol Elton John and his friends. As with Champagne's account, pleasure is only taken in the subject's effeminacy at the point where he is about to claim a gay identity; indeed, DeCaro does so using the gay speak of queans and drag queens. But significantly, he renames his entire suburban childhood with this new moniker. Despite apparently facing the same kinds of experiences as Champagne (e.g., hearing 'that word ['fag'] five days a week for nine years' (p. 111)), DeCaro recasts his early years with a marker of latterly-discovered pride.

The title of White's *A Boy's Own Story* ostensibly works in the opposite manner to *A Boy Named Phyllis*, by disavowing the narrative's adult perspective. White's title militates against his later stated aim of 'integrating' early memories of childhood, by suggesting that, in speaking for itself, boyhood can be conceived of independently to manhood. Quite simply, though, the story is not the boy's to own; at least, as the equally erudite and melancholic narrative voice indicates, it is certainly not being told by him. A brief history of the novel's covers, however, demonstrates something that approximates the reclamation of the sissy that is acknowledged in the title of DeCaro's autobiography. The famous cover to the first edition of *A Boy's Own Story* (figure 1.1) is a photograph of a particularly un-sissyish teenager. Admittedly, the youth looks a little anguished, and is wearing pink (though a of decidedly dirty hue), but these are the only marks that approximate effeminacy: his gym singlet, and in particular, his surprisingly sturdy musculature and strong jaw line position him as being closer to adulthood than childhood. This cover, then, is doubly disingenuous, featuring a title that disavows the text's adult voice and a masculine, sexually charged image that moves against the text's preoccupation with an early effeminate subjectivity. Picador's twentieth-anniversary edition of the novel, however, unequivocally reconfirms the text's avowal of early boyhood with a black-and-white photograph of an ungainly White, aged six (figure 1.2). That the image is from the author's own collection, and is taken in his father's driveway, suggests a newly found eagerness to position and market the text as 'authentic' invocation of a 1950s suburban childhood, and that it is no longer necessary to package a gay text with quasi-adult gay imagery. (Interestingly enough, an image of the original cover is reproduced on the back cover of the 2002 edition, as if to acknowledge the publisher's repositioning of the novel.)
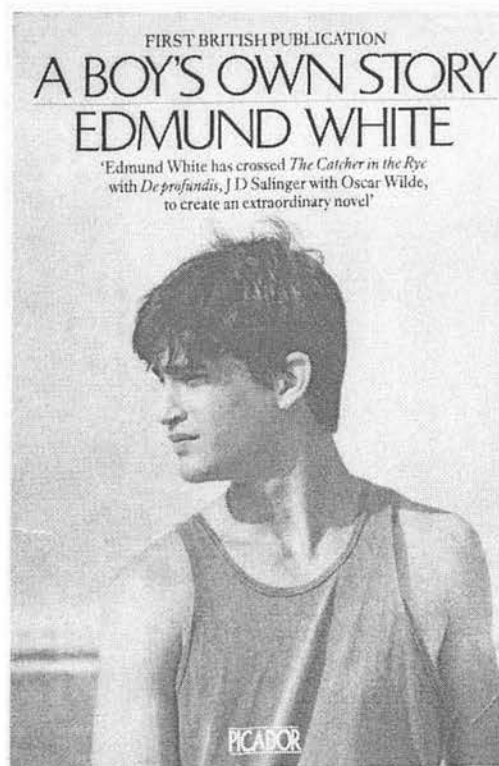
Figure 1.1 First edition (Picador, 1983) cover of *A Boy's Own Story*
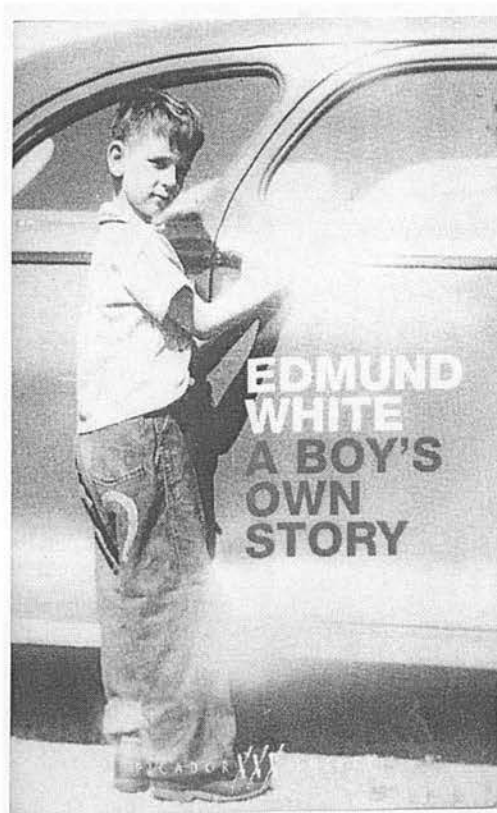
Figure 1.2 2002 (Picador) edition cover

Negotiating Anti-Effeminacy in Gay Subculture

DeCaro, whilst retrospectively proud of his youthful effeminate self, is still resoundingly thankful to have been able to relocate to the Chelsea district of New York City, where he enjoys a strong sense of belonging. Some texts, however, reconsider childhood effeminacy in response to a disappointment with urban gay cultures, particularly with regards to the latter's tendency to re-impose codes of gendered behaviour that are exasperatingly close to those maintained in the high school and on suburban streets. According to Champagne, 'traveling from Greenfield to Milwaukee seemed primarily to be a matter of trading one restrictive identity for another' (p. 78). Indeed, the commandments of his well-meaning best friend have the same function as the ones issued in Greenfield corridors and classrooms: 'She warned me never to drink too much, never to talk too much or too little or too seriously. Never act afraid or as if I believed I didn't fit in. Never draw too much or too little attention to myself.' (p. 77) Whilst the teenage Champagne may have benefited from these seminars in terms of a boost in confidence, their primary aim is to mould his behaviour in order that he may fit in with the Milwaukee gay disco set. Champagne considers it equally ironic and wearying that his first love, met at one of these clubs, seeks to transform him once again, this time into the man's 'image of a "respectable" gay person': 'hair parted on the side' (p. 78) instead of the screaming effeminacy of backless black leotards and rhinestone-studded T-shirts (p. 76).

Subsequently, however, after further relocation to a larger, more distant city (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), and his involvement in an alternative gay subcultural arena (the Academy), Champagne becomes more optimistic about the variety and inclusivity of gay life. He believes that with gay and lesbian studies, and particularly, constructionist theories of sexuality, has come 'an awareness that we have the ability to create ourselves as gay, to invent identities less restrictive than those historically bequeathed to us.' (p. 79) Champagne perceives that this more dynamic conceptualization of sexuality may be utilized to 'create new styles and places, places where being gay means more than merely attempting to conform to certain preexisting notions of gender and sexuality.' (p. 79) The new 'places' that Champagne speaks of, though, do not overturn the old suburban-urban binary of gay identity. In the imagined trickle-down gay intellectual economy, bar culture does seem to have become less restrictive – 'now, I can sing show tunes *and* wear leather without feeling like a social outcast.' (p. 79) But these hybridized and self-parodying performances of gender have yet to reach the suburbs. On returning to Greenfield for his

ten-year high-school reunion, Champagne endures a continued inquest into his marital status but otherwise notes the absence of much hostility. Yet he cannot help but conclude by re-invoking the age-old jibe, saying 'I will have to wait another ten years to hear how they reacted to that fag Champagne's first novel.' (p. 79) The experience of a decade of homophobia, it seems, obscures even the beginnings of any movement towards open-mindedness in the suburbs.

Mike Albo's novel *Hornito: My Lie Life* is constituted of a similar kind of polemic against gay urban culture's rigidly gendered behaviour. Albo's fictional writing, though, balks at the kind of critical commentary of gay identity found in autobiographies like Champagne's. To Albo's narrator (also named Mike Albo) it 'all sounds so college-gender-studies-department', as if this kind of discourse is too glib or removed to expose in any meaningful way the contradictions of modern gay life.[47] Instead, Albo lets the structure of his book do most of the work. Unusually for a coming-out novel, the narrative is organized around a sequence of vignettes which juxtapose scenes from the protagonist's suburban sissy-boy childhood with accounts of his dispirited adult life dominated by the gay scene in New York City. These twinned episodes are always linked by a particular image, emotion or object which stands to explain the relationship between suburban sissydom and gay urbanity. Frequently, the anxieties of gay men are shown to derive from the persecution of the effeminate boy. Albo's professed 'internal-femme-phobia' (p. 51) is a consequence of the punitive regimes enforced by his sissy-hating classmates and older brother. Mike sees avowedly effeminate gay men – such as Jerald, a seriously good voguer, and 'one of those guys who uses "diva" a lot' – as both brave and true, and berates himself and 'every other gay guy in America' for having long since torn up 'the same chiffony longings', as exhibited by Jerald, opting instead for the bad faith of 'straight-acting'.

However, it seems that precious few instances of the pure and genuine survive for long in the jaded and artificial milieu of gay New York. Mike subsequently catches a glimpse of the same Jerald in a gay sauna 'in jeans, a cutoff T-shirt, and a baseball hat, looking suddenly more manly. He has a blank look on his face, his arm set, permanently flexed, holding a Budweiser can like he's John Henry with his hammer. He sees me and I swear he registers my face before he quickly clomps away.' (p. 81) These kind of scenes are never celebrated for their performativity, for the potential they have to undermine the

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[47] Mike Albo, *Hornito: My Lie Life* (New York: Perennial, 2001 [2000]), p. 51. Subsequent page references given in parentheses.

'naturalness' of conventional masculinity. Much rather, they reveal the extremely low sexual currency that effeminacy has in gay subculture.

Yet, other experiences in the sauna evoke and re-affirm sexual and emotional aspects of effeminacy. The following is a description of a rare, satisfying sexual scene:

> I come and he kisses me and there are extra hands around us patting and brushing by us like jungle foliage. We kiss among the hands and cloth and I kind of laugh because I suddenly imagined the hands were framing us with satin gloves, those jazzy hands like the hands of dancers shimmying around our bodies as we press together. (pp. 83-4)

The scene re-invokes childhood experiences, such as those recalled in the reverie entitled *The Dancers*, where the young Mike is thrilled by the shimmering, gyrating sexuality of the 'flaggy, faggy dancer men' on 1980s TV shows, but is also frightened by their 'leotard liberty': 'They seem so brave and unashamed.' (pp. 46-7) The episode in the sauna is paired with one called *The Sensation*, which recalls the pleasure Mike takes in wearing the satin shorts worn by his rollergirl pin-up – 'they make me feel sheer and elegant and sexy and weird. [...] They make me feel something and I call it "The Sensation"' (p. 85); 'I know that when I am older, I will be part of a supportive, joyous, New York roller-disco crowd, joining hands and gliding along the smooth, smooth surface of adult landscapes.' (p. 86) Both of these childhood memories capture a yearning after the sexiness and the freedom of something that approximates a gay urban community; both are cruelly interrupted and denigrated by Mike's older brother, who 'monitors my every effeminate gesture' (p. 47).

The sauna scene, then – just momentarily – captures perfectly the dreams of the sissy. Despite his naivety, the effeminate boy offers a vision of a future environment and community that is both sexy and supportive, qualities the contemporary gay scene appears sorely to lack. He is also capable of an emotional sophistication that outstrips the blank stares of the sauna goers: 'When I look at these steel-faced gym-pumped men, I wait and I wait for their faces to lighten up and say, "Ha-ha! That's so funny!" but they never do. It's as if everyone is holding his breath.' (p. 81) Mike is reminded of the 'fixed wartime expressions' of his toy soldiers and how as a child, he would be 'more interested in making these figurines develop interpersonal relationships so that they must rely on each other for emotional support in tough times because then I can make them hug each other. I know I am being sissyish but I can't stop myself.' (p. 69) But Mike's sissiness stands rather as a

camp victory over the butch behaviour these kinds of toys are supposed to instil. Certainly, Mike's fancifulness comes across as altogether appealing in contrast to his childhood friend Wade's maniacal destructiveness (whose preferred method for inducing locomotion in their toys is by means of a baseball bat). That this particular scene ends in their pre-pubescent sexual union further suggests the two children represent the opposing gay modes depicted in the sauna: a crass, inhibited masculinism on the one hand, and the emotional creativity of effeminacy on the other.

Unfortunately for Mike, he is never able to communicate the significance of the lessons of his suburban past. With friends and lovers, he makes a habit of selecting irrelevant details when expostulating about gay life: he talks of the *wrong* toys (his electronic game 'Merlin' (p. 59) instead of the toy soldiers); he recalls the *wrong* sensation (the disgust at how salamanders in mud sound like spooning Macaroni cheese (p. 55), *not* satin's feeling of freedom). After receiving one too many expressions of puzzlement followed by boredom, poor Mike concludes 'I will never like anyone who has an interesting life.' (p. 133) Yet it is his sissy childhood, his own suburban life, full of informative challenges and inspiring interpretation, which is the richest. Mike's pessimism rather reveals the weakness of the novel's structure and approach. Relying too heavily on emotional comparisons between one's present and one's early life is a hit-and-miss strategy. As a consequence of suburbia's excessively consumerist way of life, it seems that memories of cul-de-sac childhoods unearth considerable nostalgic clutter. Perhaps a little more 'college-gender-studies-department'-type talk is needed, after all.

'I Might Even Have Sat on His Lap': Learning From the Stories of Sissies

Richard McCann also finds the struggles of the sissy to be inspiring and instructive. However, unlike Albo, he is not averse to theorizing about gender and identity much more explicitly. In an early section of *Mother of Sorrows*, entitled 'My Mother's Clothes: The School of Beauty and Shame', the narrator's father presents his son with a gift of a series of cards inscribed with the briefest of personal details, such as the boy's address, favourite colour and sport etc. The present is prompted by an anxiety that his son is identifying too closely with his mother and the feminine. Masculine identity, this offering suggests, can only be constructed and maintained with a minimum of reflection and self-identification. However, certain facts presented by his father are plain 'fiction' – his father's belief that swimming is his son's favourite sport altogether ill describes the boy's single unpleasant

experience, of thrashing 'across the surface, violently afraid I'd sink.' (p. 23) Such an attempt at standard masculinity – where the boy is shown to be quite literally in the wrong element – is immediately contrasted with the boy's quiescence when dressing in his mother's clothes. The narrator seeks to achieve 'beauty attained by lacquered stasis, beauty attained by fixed poses – "ladylike stillness," the stillness of mannequins, the stillness of models "caught" in mid-gesture' (p. 23). The solemn tranquillity of the boy transforming himself with his mother's clothes into extravagantly feminine figures – chanteuse, Mexican penitent, Latin movie star – constitutes an extended meditation on gender and self that is utterly at odds with the father's sparse construction of masculinity. The complex involvement with femininity, contained within the boy's reflection – that is, the mirror's image and also the boy's introspection – is understood not to be merely a stage of adolescence. The close examination and performance of femininity – which can offer both the possibility of transformation and escape but also stinging self-reproach – remains a significant aspect of gay subculture: 'The mirror was a silvery stream: on the far side, in a clearing, stood the woman who was icily immune to the boy's terror and contempt; on the close side, in the bedroom, stood the boy who feared and yet longed after her inviolability. (Perhaps, it occurs to me now that, this doubleness is the source of drag queens' vulnerable ferocity.)' (p. 24) Here, the audience of the drag queen – adult gay men – assumes the same position as the boy; the fascination with the contrariness of effeminacy, McCann's aside suggests, can still be as mesmerising for homosexual adults as it is for children experiencing it for the first time.

Yet, the narrator-as-author intervenes again to acknowledge the repudiation of femininity, or at least the adoption of a bland masculine aesthetic across broad swathes of American urban gay subcultures:

> Right now, as I write this, I am wearing khaki trousers and an Oxford cloth shirt: an anonymous American costume, although partaking of certain signs of class and education, and, perhaps, partaking also of certain signs of sexual orientation, this costume having become one of the standard uniforms of the urban American gay man. (pp. 25-6)

The masculine dress described here is almost as far away from another urban gay uniform, the macho 'clone' look (typically, denim and lumberjack shirts), as it is from the stage costumes and paraphernalia of the drag-queen. For whilst both the outfits of the clone and the drag-queen are exercises in gender exaggeration (and often celebrated as such), the

khaki-Oxford cloth ensemble attempts the same kind of masculine minimalism of the narrator's father (as the narrator suggests, this minimalism is associated with an educated middle-class). But despite his own apparent assimilation into the blandness of contemporary urban gay culture, the narrator emphatically seeks to recover the suburban sissy, to reconnect with his own investment in femininity – and by extension that of other gay men. He continues by asking:

> Why do I tell you these things? Am I trying – not subtly – to inform us of my 'maleness,' to reassure us that I have 'survived' without noticeable 'complexes'? Or is this my urge, my constant urge, to complicate my portrait to both of us, so that I might layer my selves like so many multicoloured crinoline slips, each rustling as I walk? When the wind blows, lifting my skirt, I do not know which slip will be revealed. (p. 26)

This set of rhetorical questions demonstrates the narrator's refusal to collaborate in the effacement of childhood effeminacy. Instead of aligning himself with a normative narrative of gender development, by describing himself as having recovered from a past, stigmatized condition, the narrator expressly desires – as he says, it is his 'constant urge' – to present early effeminacy as an integral element of his current sense of selfhood. Indeed, his childhood self is an incontrovertible constituent of his identity, being ever audible and about to expose itself. The narrator's final expression of his identity as a kind of multi-layered transvestism runs close to suggesting that he and other gay men ought to accept that their latent effeminacy – the way they appear or sound, for instance – can never be hidden successfully. However, such an interpretation, with its essentialist underpinnings, would altogether work against the simile of the layered slips which emphasizes multiplicity and performance. Indeed, as a consequence of rigorously enforced codes of masculine behaviour, the narrator as a child abandons the exploration of multiple interpretations of himself for the adoption of a meagre, confining singularity:

> I could neither dispense with images [of himself cross-dressing] nor take their flexibility as pleasure, for the idea of self I had learned and was learning still was that one was constructed by one's images – *'When boys cross their legs, they cross one ankle atop the knee'* – so that one finally sought the protection of believing in one's own image and, in believing it as reality, condemning oneself to its poverty. (pp. 24-5)

Only as an adult is it possible to appreciate the gender variance of childhood, and to accept that variation as an integral part of one's own identity. Such approbation is undoubtedly enabled by the mature narrator's spatial and temporal distance from the sissy boy's suburban environment. Also, as references to the qualities of drag-queens suggest, the recuperation of childhood effeminacy is encouraged by a supportive and diverse gay subculture. This relationship runs both ways: the gender flexibility first experienced in childhood that was suppressed with miserable consequences offers gay men a lesson and means to counterbalance the tendency towards uniformity in gay urban subcultures.

Robert Rodi's effeminate old Mister Kenny, sequestered incongruously in the freshly built suburbs of Rodi's childhood, holds the same informative role as McCann's sissy boy protagonist. Clearly, the two effeminate figures differ: in Rodi's story Mister Kenny is two generations older than the archetypal sissy of the suburban coming-out story; moreover, Rodi's own childhood persona is non-effeminate, given to the 'wild roving and ranging'[48] of the rest of his neighbourhood gang. Nevertheless, in the two stories, effeminacy is experienced in childhood as similarly alluring and confusing; more significantly even, recounting these early experiences of effeminacy carries precisely the same function of educating adult gay men. Rodi sees his suburban memories as a specifically gay subcultural 'resource':

> I realized he wasn't a joke, that his prissiness and fastidiousness were in fact a refuge for him after a life – an exhausting life – of defiance and anarchy and even criminality. I'd been through a long, hard coming-out process myself and had even become something of a gay spokesman by virtue of my gay-themed novels; I'd been in newspapers and on national television discussing gay this, gay that and gay the other thing. And here, I realized, was this untapped resource from my youth. A man who must have lived a life of secret signals and hidden liaisons and furtive secret affairs, yet who managed to travel in the circles that intersected Ava Gardner's and Joe Kennedy's.[49]

Admittedly, Rodi is rather more interested in Mister Kenny's earlier exploits, his presumed involvement in an urban queer underground, than his later years of pottering around his suburban garden. But Rodi conceives the cross-generational transmission of knowledge as taking the form of a defiant replaying of a particularly suburban scene:

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[48] Rodi, 'Mister Kenny: A Memoir', p. 39.
[49] Ibid., pp. 42-3.

And what would I have said to him, anyway, had I found him? I thought about it. At length. And there was really only one answer.

I would have said, 'I know you were a sexual outlaw.'
I would have said, 'I'm one, too.'
I would have said, 'Tell me *everything*.'
And then I would have listened.
Hell. I might even have sat on his lap.[50]

The final line of the story refers to an earlier scene where Mister Kenny is recounting past adventures to a gathering of inquisitive children. Evidently discomforted when one of his audience clambers uninvited into his lap, against his natural instincts he repulses the child, simply in order to remain above suspicion in his family-oriented neighbourhood. For Rodi, then, the figure Mister Kenny offers a rare opportunity to imagine something akin to a gay upbringing or education taking place in the straightest of spaces, and a way of defying the homophobic ignorance he sees as pervading the suburbs and having kept queers such as Mister Kenny in check.

American male coming-out stories, this chapter has demonstrated, are seemingly contradictory narratives. The suburban sissy may be the principle character of such narratives, but the coming-out story ultimately describes – and celebrates – the emergence from both suburbia and sissydom. The typical trajectory of the coming-out story, characterized by the evacuation of the suburbs for the city and the corresponding transition from shameful or abject effeminacy to a proud, viable gay identity, appears to jettison the sissy, abandoning him in suburbs of the past like 1950s Carroll Knolls, Washington D.C. or 1970s Little Falls, New Jersey. Yet, whilst the conventional structure of the genre seems to divorce the sissy from gay identity through a series of mutually defining binaries – suburban/urban, adolescence/adulthood, past/present and shame/pride – equally often coming-out stories simultaneously attempt to reclaim the sissy as a gay hero of sorts. The sissy's recuperation is motivated by a desire to reincorporate a lost childhood and adolescence into an adult identity and also by – contrarily – a realization that the lives of many gay adults are altogether too reminiscent of their adolescent pasts. The championing of the sissy is facilitated by a flattening of the binaries that deliver gay identity. Most frequently, the sissy's all too obvious effeminacy is reinterpreted as proud defiance, rendering him altogether like the 'out' gay man, *even when* he actually exhibits shame and a constant scrabble towards conformity.

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[50] Ibid., p. 43.

The coming-out story, then, constantly 'undoes' itself, producing gay identity by establishing differences across space and time, whilst reconnecting gay identity with a pre-gay past by articulating their apparent similarities. These contradictions need not be problematic; indeed, they serve rather to counter the argument, considered in chapter two, that the coming-out story perpetuates a restrictive discourse of sexual identity. The most reflective versions of the genre, such as McCann's, demand consideration of the complexities of identity. Arguably, though, the suburbs in coming-out stories remain irresolvably abject spaces, bastions of homophobia locked in an intolerant past. Whilst these narratives productively problematize gay identity, they seemingly do little to broaden an understanding of what constitutes suburbia. However, the suburbs' role in producing the sissy at the very least means that coming-out stories cannot but pay them close attention. In some of these meditations, moreover, the suburbs are retrospectively rendered peculiarly transparent. This openness facilitates access to memories of childhood or adolescence; being reminiscent of the condition of adult 'outness', the openness of the suburbs unclosets the sissy as an identifiably gay figure.

Chapter Two
The Expanding Metropolis: Suburban Reconciliation in Recent British Coming-out Narratives

> In an expanding universe, time is on the side of the outcast. Those who once inhabited the suburbs of human contempt find that without changing their address they eventually live in the metropolis.[1]

Quentin Crisp's characterization of the social habilitation of homosexuality, taken from the opening of his autobiography *The Naked Civil Servant*, first published in 1968, seemingly anticipates the coming-out story's suburban-urban trajectory. It certainly appears to feature the principle elements of the coming-out narrative: an abject suburban past and a reconciled metropolitan future. Crucially, however, Crisp's summary *inverts* the conventional coming-out narrative structure. It is not the outcast who leaves for the city; rather, it is he who is met by a wave of tolerance spreading outwards from the metropolis. But this account is in part disingenuous. Crisp's own progress in *The Naked Civil Servant* follows a more predictable course: he does indeed 'change address', leaving behind at the age of eighteen the unpromising and unforgiving environs of suburban Sutton in Surrey, and then the fringes of High Wycombe – 'a desert on the edge of civilization' (p. 35) – for London's West End. Here, in the déclassé bohemia of Soho and Fitzrovia of the 1920s and '30s, he discovers and joins an active homosexual milieu.

Evidently, then, Crisp is using a spatial metaphor to describe something beyond the familiar trajectory of the sexual identity narrative. What remains static and unchanged – in contrast to the personal development that structures the post-liberation coming-out stories analysed in chapter one – is Crisp's conceptualization of himself. Unlike later coming-out narratives, where the permutations of gender and sexuality are to an extent flexible and contestable, in *The Naked Civil Servant* the categories effeminacy and homosexuality are inevitably fused, their coupling always tautological. Crisp's effeminacy corresponds to an essential core that defines both his childhood and adulthood. Indeed, his cosmological metaphor for an increasingly tolerant society locates Crisp as a fixed pole, an immutable object: it is not he who has accommodated to a hostile public, but they who have learned to accept difference.

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[1] Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant* (Jonathan Cape: London, 1968), p. 8. Subsequent page references given in parentheses.

The strengths of Crisp's 'expanding universe' model correspond to its weaknesses; it is as much a measure of his good faith as it is of his own inadaptability. On the one hand, his unwillingness to compromise his appearance when walking the streets of London demonstrates Crisp's conviction that his effeminacy is fundamental to his very being. Certainly, Crisp has been much celebrated for his defiance and resilience in the face of physical violence against his person. However, on the other hand, by insisting that his personal circumstances are unchangeable and that the world has come to be more accepting through no action of his own – whilst simultaneously re-inscribing the metropolitan centre as the engine of social change – he distances himself from the political imperative that fuelled the gay liberation movement and the authors of no few coming-out stories. His refusal to countenance homosexual political agency has understandably attracted considerable criticism, and Crisp alludes to his own sense of being anachronistic at the end of his autobiography: 'I was not merely a stopped clock; I was a stopped grandfather clock.' (p. 209) Further, he manages to reiterate that society has independently become more tolerant, remarking that what annoyed people (or at least, people at fashionable parties on the King's Road) 'was my pomposity – my insistence on taking the blame for something on which judgment was no longer passed.' (p. 209)

Post-Metropolitan Formations

Are there limits to the expansion of this metropolitan universe? Is even the most contemptible suburb redeemable? After relocating from the capital to one of the remotest corners of England, writer Patrick Gale dispels the image of the countryside being a hostile wilderness where gay people must live in hiding. Indeed, on the contrary, it is his homosexuality that renders him eminently traceable from the metropolis: 'People send letters to "Patrick Gale, Gay Author, Land's End", and the postmistress simply hands them over with a giggle.'[2] Similarly, the character of Daffyd Thomas, the self-proclaimed 'only gay in the village' of the popular BBC show *Little Britain*, proposes that the country's furthest peripheries have been transformed. Daffyd derives much of his comic propulsion by insisting on the isolation and discrimination that he faces on account of being gay, despite his rural community's evident and often eager acceptance of homosexuality. He repeatedly manifests the same pomposity that Crisp identifies in his older self; indeed,

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[2] In Benedict Brook, 'Village People', *Gay Times*, September 2005, pp. 32-6 (p. 35).

ultimately Daffyd is out of place precisely not for being gay but because he is the only individual who misrecognises gay milieus and who holds homophobic opinions. One scene for instance concludes with Daffyd aghast as the various masculine types in his local pub – rugby players, miner, farmer etc – all comfortably declare their predilections for various forms of gay sex. Daffyd responds 'I've had it with this village, I'm [getting] as far away from here as possible, to a place where gay people are not welcome where I am the only one [...]. I got two uncles in San Francisco. I'm gonna go there.'[3] What is particularly amusing about his reaction is its convolution of the familiar tropes of coming-out. Daffyd wishes to escape his home village because it is *too* accepting of homosexuality – yet the alternative he proposes is of course historically renowned for being the premier destination for gay runaways. The location of the 'Daffyd' sketches suggests strongly that conventional narratives of coming out, with their inevitable metropolitan trajectories, are redundant. For if a small Welsh mining village, which is culturally and geographically about as far away from metropolitan centres as it is possible to get, is taken as indexical of the extent of Britain's tolerance of homosexuality, few gay people anywhere ought to have many complaints about homophobia. Alas, a cursory survey of Internet profiles of rural gay men shows that 'the only gay in the village' is a descriptor that is used frequently and often completely without irony.

Perhaps the above analysis of Daffyd could be accused of taking *Little Britain*'s humour too seriously. But actually, that is precisely the sketch's thesis about gay identity in contemporary Britain. What is supposed to be hilarious about Daffyd is his ludicrous seriousness, his overstatement of his gayness which, aided by the hopeless clownishness of his fetish and clubbing apparel, always comes at the cost of achieving any sexual gratification. (As the village pub's barmaid Myfanwy says over and over: 'Oh Daffyd, you bloody fool! Think of all the cock and bum fun you could have had!'[4]) Daffyd's gayness is all about 'being' and nothing about 'doing', whereas for his well-adjusted peers the opposite is true: unencumbered with concerns about identity they go about gay sex as if it were an entirely quotidian activity. In satirizing manifest sexual identity as both counterproductive and anachronistic, and with its championing of an identity-free ambisexuality, *Little Britain*'s Daffyd sketch seems to support Alan Sinfield's contention

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[3] Matt Lucas and David Williams, *Little Britain: The Complete Scripts and Stuff: Series Two* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 219.
[4] Matt Lucas and David Williams, *Little Britain: The Complete Scripts and All That – Series 1: Vol. 1* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 207.

that we have entered the 'post-gay' era, 'a period when it will not seem so necessary to define, and hence to limit, our sexualities.'[5] Moreover, Sinfield speaks repeatedly of the 'metropolitan model of gay identity' as being the dominant paradigm through which 'gay' and 'lesbian' have been constructed in the West since Stonewall. As chapter one has shown, in the principle narrative vehicle of gay identity, the coming-out story, 'gay' has repeatedly been presented as a fundamentally urban formation. The post-gay, therefore, is also likely to be post-metropolitan. Daffyd, then, is both out of place and time.[6]

The symmetry between the handling of Crisp and Daffyd – the former a pre-liberation figure, the latter firmly part of the post-gay present – is potentially troubling for anyone with an investment in gay identity. That each character seemingly occupies a position just outside the metropolitan moment, the heyday of 'gay', firstly indicates the brevity of that moment. A mere three and a half decades make up the period when gay seemed radical and productive, a political and cultural aspiration. But Crisp's and Daffyd's identical treatment reveals a more acute difficulty. Both individuals face the same accusation that they make too much of their sexual orientation, essentially because the world is already accepting of them. This response is presumably the most advanced and sophisticated on offer: as Crisp shows, it springs from the heart of the metropolis. On the surface, it attempts, rightly enough, to puncture self-importance and penalize gaucheness. But this agreeable motivation obscures something more ambivalent: a preference that homosexuals not draw attention to themselves. Such a desire is all too reminiscent of long-established cultural and institutional practices which have marginalized queers by granting them freedoms only within the private sphere. For instance, Patrick Higgins has shown that many liberal reformers who were involved with the Wolfenden Committee (1954-7) and Report (1957), which recommended the partial decriminalization of homosexuality (eventually achieved in 1967), repeatedly advocated the legalization of sexual relations between men in private as a means of inhibiting the development of a public homosexual subculture. As one reformer declared in 1957, 'if we no longer impose a legal code of sexual behaviour which we do not

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[5] Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), p. 14.

[6] Actually, Little Britain co-writer Matt Lucas who plays Daffyd, has, alongside other prominent gay figures, campaigned to raise public awareness of gay rights abuses. Lucas's important intervention – deploring the execution in Iran of two teenagers convicted of having homosexual sex – does, however, rather serve to show that such activism no longer refers to the situation of gay people living within these shores. Lucas makes clear the distinction, declaring 'While gay visibility has grown in Britain in recent years we cannot forget the plight of those in more hostile parts of the world who live with the daily risk of jail, torture and execution for no other reason than their sexuality.' Quoted in The Press Association, 'Stars Tackle Iran Gay Rights Abuses', *Scotsman*, 4 October 2005, http://news.scotsman.com/latest.cfm?id=2039262005 [accessed 12 March 2006].

extract from anyone else, we can surely expect homosexuals to accept the same responsibility as the rest of us [by] behaving themselves in public.'[7] Higgins indicates that a consequence of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act was an immediate and sustained increase in the harassment of homosexuals by the police, who found it easier to make prosecutions under a new law which for the first time clearly distinguished between private and public homosexual acts. Higgins notes for instance that the practice of using *agent provocateurs* by the police to achieve prosecutions for importuning 'spread like wildfire across the nation' in the 1970s.[8]

What makes the modern version a more effective homophobic implement is that it is construed *as acceptance* and is therefore harder to critique or resist. Crisp indicates that this strategy for containing sexual dissidence was already well established in the 1960s, pre-existing liberationist constructions of gay identity. But perhaps it is possible to overstate the prevalence of a discourse which deploys 'tolerance' as a means of resisting homosexual expression; after all, lesbians and gay men have on occasion undeniably been radicalized as a consequence of overt state-sanctioned homophobia, as with the campaigns to repeal Section 28 in the late 1980s and 1990s (I discuss these briefly in chapter four). But, actually, earlier reforms, such as the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, once again aimed precisely to contain public exposure of homosexuality, by only legally sponsoring relations in private. Simultaneously, the 1967 statute was frequently mobilized to demonstrate just how accepting society had become, thereby disqualifying further public discussion on the matter. Considered a 'once-and-for-all measure' by the establishment, the Act stalled further progress in the cause of homosexual emancipation for over a decade: 'the issue ceased to occupy the attention of legislators and journalists, and homosexual reform groups found it virtually impossible to enlist their interest.'[9] More recent legal reforms, all achieved since 2000, such as the equalization of the age of consent, the repeal of Section 28 and the introduction of civil partnerships, have been deployed by the establishment in quite the same manner. Several commentators in the right-leaning popular press, for instance, have expressed discomfort over what they consider to be the overexposure of gay issues: homosexuality today, they declare, has become fundamentally uninteresting (a view that is shared by a number of American-based commentators who I consider in chapter four), the

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[7] Quoted in Patrick Higgins, *Heterosexual Dictatorship: Male Homosexuality in Postwar Britain* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996), p. 124.
[8] Ibid., pp. 145-6.
[9] Ibid., p. 145.

subtext being that now that gays and lesbians have achieved their rights there is really nothing for them to be complaining about.

British vs. American Trajectories

The persistence of this muting strategy helps to explain why the coming-out story is considerably less prevalent in Britain than in the States. Moreover, structurally, most British narratives reinforce the apparent 'uninteresting' acceptability of gay sexuality and identity. If the trajectory of the conventional American coming-out story moves from homophobic suburb to homophile city, British ones tend to confirm Crisp's thesis of the expanding metropolis: their protagonists stay in the suburbs. What these texts aim to show above all else is that various parts of British society have become sufficiently tolerant that urban relocation – and with it the separation of the gay individual from the heterosexual mainstream – is unnecessary. As a consequence though, these coming-out stories are usually compromised dramatically: the families and communities of the protagonists are effectively *already* accepting of homosexuality before any action is taken on their part. These coming-out stories therefore invalidate themselves: they suggest there is not much of a story to be told.

An arguably positive outcome of this relatively comfortable acceptance, however, is that British coming-out stories have a reassuring quality. They present a world in which tolerance and love are organizing principles. Their more optimistic outlook is compounded by the contemporariness of their suburban settings. Unlike their American counterparts, British coming-out stories, particularly those on screen, do not quarantine suburban adolescence in a hostile past; indeed, they project a benign suburban future in which generational and hetero-homosexual reconciliation is imaginable. More radically, whilst acknowledging that the country has become a more tolerant place, British coming-out stories refuse to acquiesce to the view that gay experience should be absent from public discourse. Indeed, whilst these stories often stay within the suburbs, they exhibit their own discernible narrative trajectory: from private to public space. Privacy in these texts is equated with closetedness, which proves to be both intolerable and impossible: intolerable because it is unfair, impossible because there is no way of escaping the surveillance of the suburban family and community. The suburban environment is such that gay desire is inevitably flushed out into the open: its boundaries are all too permeable: walls have ears, no space is securely private. So, the nature of suburban space facilitates the coming-out

story, or at least, the British version. These texts typically conclude with an act of coming out which occupies public space.

It is in part their resistance to the ideology which seeks to contain homosexuality within the private sphere that steers British narratives towards constructing coming out as a declarative, as opposed to an accessional, act. If American stories emphasise the importance of separating from the heterosexual family and joining urban gay subculture, their British counterparts are more concerned with ensuring that gay experience is made – and remains – in the public domain. But there is a second reason why British stories seemingly turn away from the city. Urban-based gay subcultures in Britain are not as substantial – in both real and mythic terms – than those in the States. Quite simply, in Britain, London simply does not have the gravitational pull on the gay imagination as, for instance, San Francisco in the US, a site which has become virtual metonym for gay homecoming. There are two likely reasons for the greater metropolitan bias in American gay subculture. Firstly, the more rapid expansion of gay urban centres in the US from a smaller base since the Second World War has rendered them more conspicuous than London's longer-established, but far less obvious homosexual milieus. Secondly, during the cultural and political upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, the American gay liberation movement readily drew upon other models of identarian activism, in particular, the black civil rights movement, which claimed parts of certain cities as their cultural and political constituency. British gay and lesbian activists have historically been firmly located in London and certain provincial cities, and have certainly sought – and to an extent continue to seek – to foster strategic alliances with feminist, racial and ethnic minority and other progressive movements. Yet, the make up of British cities has offered not nearly as much scope for fashioning an ethnicity and rights model of gay and lesbian identity.

The geo-cultural differences between the US and the UK, then, go some way to explain the distinctiveness of the each country's version of the coming-out story. But there is also a strong sense in which the coming-out story has *not* adapted particularly well to British suburban soil. As I suggested in the introduction, many aspects of gay identity and subculture in Britain are effectively transatlantic imports. Some elements, however, have proven to be culturally incongruent. Sinfield notes:

> This cultural interchange is registered [...] by Armistead Maupin in *Babycakes*, set in 1983. Michael visits the Coleherne (leather pub): 'there was something almost poignant about pasty-faced Britishers trying to pull off a butch biker routine. They

were simply the wrong breed for it ... Phrases like "Suck that big, fat cock" and "Yeah, you want it, don't you?" sounded just plain asinine when muttered with an Oxonian accent.'

Sinfield complains that Maupin's 'is a tourist perception of Britain – the characters who don't have Oxonian accents are broad cockneys.' 'Even so', Sinfield acknowledges, 'he has a point.'[10] The coming-out story is another example of the incomplete, imperfect adoption of what is effectively an American formation. As I will show, on closer inspection British coming-out narratives actually offer their protagonists an escape route out of the suburbs, suggesting a residual anxiety about such environments that seemingly contradicts their main aim – of demonstrating the possibility of reconciliation – and which has more in common with the trajectory of the American 'originals'. What is more, British stories appear very much conscious of the American provenance of the coming-out narrative: US cultural products such as cars and songs – quite incongruous in English suburbia – are closely associated with suburban flight.

British coming-out stories, then, seem to follow two divergent narrative trajectories. The first moves from secrecy to disclosure, from private to public space, whilst remaining in the suburbs. The second, evidence of the coming-out story's American legacy, abandons the suburbs, presumably for the city. Consequently, the suburbs in British coming-out stories have a doubled – and contradictory – signification: they are places which embody tolerance but also hostility and restriction. British coming-out stories continually oscillate between each interpretation of the suburb. Even after the final act of coming out, that is, the declaration of sexual identity to the heterosexual family and community, the suburbs are not entirely stabilized as sites which are conducive to uncloseted gay identity. Often the audience is invited to project the narrative beyond the ending. This imagined continuation generally counteracts the optimism of the comforting final scene.

Three relatively well-known British texts clearly manifest the tensions between these two trajectories: *Beautiful Thing* (1996), *Get Real* (1999) and *Queer as Folk* (as well as its sequel *Queer as Folk 2* (Channel 4, 1998 and 2000)).[11] The first two are feature films

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[10] Sinfield, *Gay and After*, p. 103.
[11] I am not the first to discuss the three narratives together: James Carey Parks virtually considers them as three parts of one larger story, 'an informal trilogy of 90s dramas that examine and explore the experiences of gay teenagers.' James Carey Parkes, 'From Reel Lies to Real Lives', *Gay Times*, May 1999, p. 26.

(though both are based on stage plays), the latter a successful television series.[12] It may be the case that coming-out films necessarily work in quite different ways to the printed stories examined in the previous chapter. It could be argued, for instance, that the tendency for these British films to favour a declarative model of coming out over an accessional or, indeed, an introspective, developmental one – i.e. a narrative which emphasizes the process of the individual's coming out to her/himself – simply reflects the requirements of their form. Perhaps it is simply these screen-based narratives' requirement for a climactic denouement that explains the centrality of the declarative act. Certainly, the predominantly visual aspect of feature films and, to an extent, television series, makes them less well suited to depicting psychological development.

American films produced at the same time suggest otherwise, however, with many sharing much more in common with the printed coming-out stories examined in chapter one than films made and set in Britain. *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993) and *Edge of Seventeen* (1998) are both cases in point. Todd Haynes's short film *Dottie Gets Spanked*, set in East Coast suburbia in the mid-1960s, explores six-year-old Steven Gale's obsession with his favourite television star, Dottie Frank, and in particular, his psychosexual investment in the scenes of spanking that always conclude her show. Steven's close identification with Dottie finds expression through his repeated sketching of her and her friends, which attracts the concerns of his parents. His father in particular wishes Steven to join him in more masculine-identified pop-cultural pursuits (watching football, etc.), and Steven is also ridiculed by his school peers for his effeminacy, at one point being identified as a 'feminino' by a girl younger than he.

Dottie Gets Spanked, then, has many of the hallmarks of the sissy narrative. Certainly, there is no coming-out scene or any explicit reference to gay identity; indeed, nothing of Steven's later life is depicted. Yet Haynes shares a similar relationship with the text as many authors of sissy stories do with theirs. Haynes admits that *Dottie Gets Spanked* 'draws the most from autobiographical material than anything I've ever done'.[13] Steven's sketches are actually near-replicas of Haynes's own childhood Crayola-paeans to Lucille Ball, who played the Dottie-like lead in the 1960s show *I Love Lucy*. Haynes is, then, quite

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[12] *Beautiful Thing* (dir. Hattie McDonald, FilmFour, 1996) is an adaptation of Jonathan Harvey's play of the same name (1993), *Get Real* (dir. Simon Shore, Paramount, 1998) is based on Patrick Wilde's *What's Wrong With Angry?* (1993). *Queer as Folk* has subsequently been remade for the American market (to date, five seasons' worth, Showtime US, 2000-05).

[13] From director's audio-commentary to *Dottie Gets Spanked* (Zeitgeist DVD, 1993)

literally drawing a line between childhood effeminacy and adult gayness. As he states in his commentary of the film:

> I realized how much pleasure I gained from making them up, all the ladies I drew. Looking at them now, they're all heels and tits and eyelashes; they look like whores. But no matter how pornographically they're drawn, it's clear they are the subjects of the drawings, and not the objects. The few pictures of men all look like girls in drag. How could my parents have thought I was anything but a flaming queen?[14]

The film also has in common with conventional sissy narratives some of the tropes that auger gayness. Steven wins the opportunity to visit Dottie on set in New York City, and his delight is evident as he crosses the sun-drenched Williamsburg Bridge into Manhattan. As in DeCaro's *A Boy Named Phyllis*, the excursion into the city prefigures the trajectory of the adult gay man: witnessing Dottie Frank's autocratic on-set behaviour fuels Steven's own directorial ambitions, as evidenced in a number of subsequent dream sequences that have Steven dressed as a king instructing his subjects to do as sees fit, a development that inevitably evokes Haynes's own transformation into gay filmmaker. *Dottie Gets Spanked* concludes with Steven not destroying but carefully burying his last drawing of Dottie (getting spanked) in his garden, which suggests either that his identification with the feminine can be dug up at a later date when things are safer (i.e. after having reached the gay city), or, indeed, that it is the very seed that will later develop into a more fully realized gay adult identity.

Set in Sandusky, Ohio, *Edge of Seventeen* trades heavily on its reconstruction of 1980s suburbia. The film's marketing is emphatic about its retro 'period' setting: 'The summer of 1984 was about as 80's as the 80's [sic] ever got'; 'A quintessential 80's film.'[15] Two of the *Edge of Seventeen*'s most notable invocations of the era are the kaleidoscope of garish outfits worn by the teenage protagonist Eric, and his close interest with contemporary popular music. Tracks from eighties icons Bronski Beat and Eurythmics feature diegetically as cultural products which help enable Eric's coming out. The fourteen years that separate the film's setting and its release date are made to feel very long indeed. The fact that *Edge of Seventeen* was made between the release dates of *Beautiful Thing* and *Get Real* appears to have no bearing on its interpretation of what it means to come out. While, as suggested

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[14] Ibid.
[15] *Edge of Seventeen*, dir. David Moreton, Blue Streak, 1998. From publicity on Strand Home Video cassette cover.

above, print-media favours the introspective narrative and film the declarative, *Edge of Seventeen* does manage to depict in some depth the struggles of a young individual coming to terms with his own homosexuality. Early on, the young Eric seems unsure of what to make of his feelings for his older colleague, the predatory Rod, and asks his mother and his best friend Maggie questions about what constitutes love and sexual desire. We later see Eric surreptitiously buy and listen to Bronski Beat's gay political album *Age of Consent*, which, along with exposure to some moderate homophobia, propels him to a local gay and lesbian bar. The novel thrill of 'The Fruit and Nut', and the comfort he finds in community there, encourage Eric to undergo a series of increasingly flamboyant self-transformations. However, the insincerity of some of the gay men he meets, whose interest in Eric lasts only as long as their hurried sexual encounters, drives him to temporarily reject both the club and his new sexual identity. Eric subsequently not only flatly denies being gay to his mother, he attempts (unsuccessfully) to re-impose heterosexuality on himself by sleeping with Maggie, which has disastrous consequences for their friendship. But after an unrewarding coming-out scene with his mother ('Oh my little boy, what did I do wrong? [...] I don't know how to handle this'), Eric returns to the gay bar where he is warmly welcomed. Indeed, the film concludes with Eric resisting the advances of a young man in the bar in order to listen to his lesbian friend and mentor Angie sing a song dedicated to him. In the future, it seems, Eric will draw succour and support not from his family (who have also threatened to withdraw financial support for his college aspirations), but from the gay community.

In stark contrast to *Beautiful Thing* and *Get Real*, *Edge of Seventeen* is deeply pessimistic about the chances of straight-gay reconciliation in suburbia. In spite of her being in every other instance warm, empathic and generous, Eric's mother balks at her son's homosexuality. In response to his near-tearful 'I guess if I came out everything would get easier', Eric and Angie fall into hysterical laughter: such optimism is naive. Angie's subsequent advice to Eric is that he should concentrate not on attempting to secure the understanding of others, but instead work towards the completion of his own process of coming out: 'you have to accept you want to love another guy and that takes time.' Unlike the declarative narratives of British films which tend to presume self-acceptance has already occurred before the film begins and thus not is something that need be shown, *Edge of Seventeen* demonstrates that it can only fully be resolved after the final credits roll.

Moreover, that internalized process of coming out is not only crucial subject matter, it is something which is too substantial to be fully dealt with within one movie.

Like the traditional coming-out story, *Edge of Seventeen* is also much more explicit about the requirement for relocation. True, the gay bar that Eric runs to is in Sandusky; further, he is encouraged in his original ambition of moving to New York by none other than his mother, who puts in extra hours to come up with the high tuition fees. Without that help it looks like Eric will study locally, but the withdrawal of support is offset perhaps by the chance of living amongst another home-grown gay community, the 'gay wing' of Mid-Ohio State's student residences. But just as Angie's lakeside home is an idyllic and comforting counterpoint to the suburban household that has ultimately rejected Eric, the bar is a world away from the crass and hostile environment of the high-school party. Actually, viewers have found some aspects of gay life depicted in *Edge of Seventeen* as somewhat out of place: the presence of poppers and the brassy Angie, played by lesbian comic Lea DeLaria, are 'just a little too odd and *urban* to blend in [sic] a Sandusky supermarket' (my emphasis).[16] But regardless of its specific location, the bar represents an entirely separate and autonomous subculture: the likes of Eric, the film suggests, must align themselves with the nearest supportive gay community in order to be happily gay.

Michael Bronski applauds the relative sophistication of *Dottie Gets Spanked* and *Edge of Seventeen*. Bronski complains that the likes of *Beautiful Thing* and *Get Real* are, by contrast, unsatisfying because, in both films, the protagonists' coming out constitute over-privileged narratives which do not interact with other characters sufficiently to be convincing or interesting. Bronski is representative of a considerable number of critics who find the apparent narrowness of these coming-out films problematic, and since I wish to forestall such arguments, I will examine Bronski's position in detail.[17] Bronski appreciates

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[16] NJMoon, 'Living on the EDGE', 29 July 2000, 'IMDb user comments for *Edge of Seventeen*', http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0138414/usercomments [accessed 17 May 2005].

[17] For example, Adam Mars-Jones argues that *Beautiful Thing* 'would have more force if it didn't pretend that self-acceptance was a one-shot deal'; the issues around coming out are 'really not so simple, [...] positive images only go so far' (Quoted in Santiago Fouz-Hernández, 'School is Out: The British 'Coming Out' Films of the 1990s', *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, 1 (2002), 149-64 (pp. 151-2). Similarly, Liese Spencer complains that 'problems are pushed to the periphery' in *Beautiful Thing* (Quoted in Fouz-Hernández, ibid., p. 152). Ros Jennings agrees with Bronski that 'as the main focus of the film, [the gay teenage protagonists'] representation is the most positive and possibly as a result of this, also the most one-dimensional'. Her contention that *Beautiful Thing* renders sexuality more ambiguous through secondary characters who are 'more contradictory and less clear-cut' is, though, unconvincing (Ros Jennings, '*Beautiful Thing*, British Queer Cinema, Positive Unoriginality and the Everyday', in *British Queer Cinema*, ed. Robin Griffiths (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 183-94 (p. 189)). Jennings insists that what is so interesting about the film is that it simultaneously produces 'positive images' of gay youth whilst seeking to destabilize

films which appear to exhibit more psychological complexity, productive ambiguity and a closer understanding of how an individual's coming out affects others. One of the problems for Bronski with British films such as *Beautiful Thing* and *Get Real* is that the act of coming out 'is always the end point, never the beginning', which means the disclosure of gayness 'becomes a major character-defining action that has few consequences.'[18] But if it is indeed the case that in both films the act of coming out comes to dominate all other concerns, then both, as I discuss below, at least pass comment on the ways in which certain characters are marginalized by the central narrative. What *Beautiful Thing* and *Get Real* may lack in terms of psychological involvement, they more than make up with a quite sophisticated metanarratival awareness. And, whilst it is true that the conclusions of both films constitute their dramatic foci (not unusually for film), the post-denouement consequences for all characters, as I will show, are interestingly ambiguous, and complicate the apparently simplistic 'feel good' quality of these films.

In two respects, Bronski's criticism that the act of coming out is too straightforward in *Beautiful Thing* and *Get Real* is unfair. Firstly, simply, the characters undeniably exhibit great courage with their public declarations; secondly, to demonstrate that gayness 'has few consequences' is precisely the aim of these narratives. Bronski unjustly – and incoherently – skewers these and other films for being too political, and yet at the same time not political enough. In their drive to produce 'positive images', *Beautiful Thing* et al. are 'innately political'; a bad thing, as propaganda makes bad art. Simultaneously, they reflect the 'depoliticization of coming out', which Bronski contends has become 'an alternative and increasingly acceptable middle-class rite of passage.' *Beautiful Thing*, though, to be discussed shortly, is actually an example of a working-class coming-out narrative; in any case, to deny or diminish the political nature of a project that has reconciliation – middle-

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representations of heterosexuality, two strategies that are usually considered to be mutually exclusive. Jennings's repeated identification of queerness in these straight characters is, however, heavy handed. For instance, the same-sex dancing (which I return to later in this chapter) that concludes the film is performed purely in support of the two gay protagonists and in defiance of the local estate's homophobia, and emphatically not to suggest, as Jennings does, that the female characters may have lesbian tendencies after all (indeed, their joking about the possibility only serves to demonstrate its unlikeliness). Also, Jennings claims *that because the film's principal straight couple met in 'Gateways', their heterosexuality is immediately called into question.* But that location almost certainly refers to a branch of the supermarket chain that has since become Somerfield, not the famous lesbian club in Chelsea. Indeed, in that scene, 'Gateways' provides bathos and provokes embarrassment, puncturing the straight male character's cosmic and cultural pretentiousness. Further, the film's purlieu is strictly 'south of the river'; Chelsea fits incongruously with the other named locations in the narrative: Bermondsey, Rotherhithe, Greenwich, Woolwich, Thamesmead and Gravesend.
[18] Michael Bronski 'Positive Images and the Coming Out Film: The Art and Politics of Gay and Lesbian Cinema', *Cineaste*, 26 (2000), 20-6 (p. 23).

class or otherwise – as its goal is simply too narrow a formulation of what constitutes gay activism. Presumably, Bronski only considers earlier, liberationist forms of organising as properly political, which he contrasts with the 'less aggressively and determinedly political'[19] activism of current times. Such a comparison, which measures an act's political significance by the degree to which it is confrontational, is surely too simplistic a definition. With arguably more justification, Bronski takes gay liberation's application of the feminist slogan 'the personal is the political' as the epitome of gay and lesbian political dynamism. Then, the act of coming out aimed to break heterosexist presumptions regarding gender and sexuality; now, the coming-out story proffers only 'easy platitudes [...] localized in the language of private identity and sexuality.'[20] But actually, one of the most striking aspects of both *Beautiful Thing* and *Get Real* is their total disavowal of any 'private language' (as with some of the earlier print-based coming-out stories, such as *A Boy's Own Story*): once again, these films aim emphatically to locate sexual identity publicly. Possibly, Bronski is confusing 'private identity' with the domestic and suburban settings of these films. If so, he would not be the first to equate homosexuality's suburbanization with its supposed depoliticization.

One advantage of these texts which Bronski does not consider is that they have each been able to reach a much wider audience than any printed material published previously. Perhaps straight people are no more likely to walk into and watch an identifiably gay film than find, pick up and read a similarly gay-themed book; television, on the other hand, is much more readily accessible, particularly in the wake of moderate publicity. The massive viewing figures (at least, for a Channel 4 drama) of *Queer as Folk* and its tumultuous reception in the mainstream press (the series was initially excoriated, then lauded), attest that its audience extended beyond just gay viewers. Meanwhile, Simon Shore, director of *Get Real*, explaining his reasons for wanting to adapt *What's Wrong With Angry?* to screen, demonstrates his faith in cinema's ability to reach a broader public, at least in comparison to theatre:

> The main difference in the film's approach from that of the play was that when I first saw it at the Battersea Arts Centre, it was with an audience of about a hundred, most of whom were gay, and what strikes me forcibly is that people who wouldn't go and see a gay play at the BAC would go and see this film. I wanted parents of

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[19] Ibid., p. 21.
[20] Ibid., p. 26.

people who are 16 and might be gay, friends of 16-year-olds who might be gay and, of course, 16-year-olds who might be realizing that they are gay to see this film.[21]

Much the same could be said for *Beautiful Thing*. Hence the narrative structure of on-screen coming-out stories matches their aims: to reach out to straight people and ask or argue for acceptance of homosexuality. In his extensive overview and analysis of (mostly documentary) coming-out films of the 1970s and 80s, Richard Dyer identifies the same desire to communicate gay experience to heterosexuals – as one documentary interviewee has it, 'exposure's the only thing to change people's minds.'[22] As Dyer acknowledges, though, it was not until recently that commercial entertainment cinema began to find some space for gay-themed films that might address a wider audience. Only in the 1990s, then, do British coming-out films really begin to achieve the original aim of 'exposure'. By comparison, as I showed in the previous chapter, the more introspective, textual coming-out story still addresses primarily a gay readership.[23]

Beautiful Thing: Rainbows over Thamesmead?

The earliest of these texts, *Beautiful Thing*, is notable for its working-class setting. The film charts two teenaged boys' discovery of their sexuality – and each other – on the Thamesmead estate, in southeast London. Indeed, the positive depiction of working-class homosexuality was for screenwriter Jonathan Harvey a primary motivation when producing the original play on which the film is based: 'I had to explain to the actors that certainly with me and my friends there wasn't much of a crisis about being gay, it was just natural to us. *Beautiful Thing* reflects this, it's a happy story. You can be gay and happy, you can be working class and accept homosexuality.'[24] This strongly felt lack of a crisis over being gay demonstrates the redundancy of the drama of the introspective coming-out narrative. And of the two protagonists, Jamie represents this maturation most clearly: he never questions or castigates himself or his feelings, despite being on the receiving end of perpetual vicious bullying at school. The other main character Ste is only slightly less representative,

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[21] Quoted in Carey Parkes, 'From Reel Lies to Real Lives', p. 22.

[22] Quoted in Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 250.

[23] Though as Jonathan Keane suggests, the coming-out novel 'is the first gay cultural form to gain "core stock" status in high street bookshops. It is valued by publishers as an interesting and saleable variation on the heterosexual classic realist text.' Jonathan Keane, 'AIDS and the Space of Identity', *Textual Practice*, 7 (1993), 453-70 (p. 462).

[24] Quoted on *Beautiful Thing* video cover (FilmFour, 1996).

exhibiting a certain reticence – rapidly abandoned – at Jamie's initial advances, and later a moment of homosexual panic ('get your fucking queer hands off of me!'), which is briefly upsetting for both Jamie and audience, but quickly resolved and forgiven. Instead of internalised trauma, *Beautiful Thing* focuses much more on public conflict and drama. Indeed, Harvey acknowledges that:

> The only images I really had of gay people when I was growing up were those public school boys in cricket jumpers taking each other punting on the river, or the working class boys who got kicked out and ended up working as rent boys. This is a play in which somebody can be working class and still have their sexuality accepted. That was my agenda.[25]

Harvey suggests that even more than wanting to show that working-class gays can be happy and homosexual, *Beautiful Thing* aims to achieve two further goals: firstly, to begin to rebalance the representation of gays in favour of those of non-bourgeois backgrounds; and secondly, and most crucially of all, to demonstrate the working-class's capacity for tolerance. The first aim, particularly, aligns with the criticism that the traditional coming-out story is a middle-class narrative. Both aims, however, are well served by the film's suburban setting. The Thamesmead estate is isolated and represented as being wholly working class.[26] Confirming a common assumption about suburbs, particularly remote, purpose-built developments, the film's setting is almost purely residential; it seems that there is little to do there. Almost all action and drama, therefore, must and does take place in and around familial environments, even if they are relatively non-conventional ones: Jamie, Ste and their friend and neighbour Leah each live in single-parent families.

Suburbs are also typically associated with surveillance. Representations of middle-class

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Twelve years after the original play's first showing, the original stage version of *Beautiful Thing* was revived, with all the same characters in place, but its setting shifted to a high-rise working-class estate on the outskirts of Manchester (The new version, directed by Marcus Romer and performed by the Pilot Theatre Company, premiered at The Octagon, Bolton, 11 March 2005). In the same way that middle-class suburban settings are frequently to be understood as ubiquitous in their anonymity, the ease of *Beautiful Thing*'s Mancunian relocation suggests the play could equally take place in any British working-class estate. Such a lack of local specificity certainly aids Harvey's asserted aim of demonstrating a working-class acceptance of gayness: one does not have to live in Greater London in order to have an accepting mother and friends. In any case, a cross-regional and even trans-national appreciation of the narrative has been demonstrated elsewhere. In John Sam Jones's *Welsh Boys Too!*, the isolated teenager Gethin – who surely stands as a literary rebuttal to *Little Britain*'s 'Only Gay in the Village' sketch – secretly watches *Beautiful Thing* in a Liverpool cinema. Whilst the film underlines the difference of his situation ('He'd want to be Jamie in the film – to be held and kissed by Ste ... He'd wanted his own mother to be accepting as Jamie's and he wanted a friend like Leah to talk to.'), Gethin can at least imagine *being* part of that narrative, and watching it has helped him enormously: 'Jamie and Ste and their story had finally begun to give that unspeakable part of Gethin's life a shape'. John Sam Jones, 'The Wonder at Seal Cave' in *Welsh Boys Too!* (Cardiff: Parthenon, 2000), p. 36.

'villadom', where residents mutually ensure the maintenance of propriety, are an especially familiar aspect of the British sitcom landscape (e.g. as in the British situation comedy *Keeping Up Appearances* (BBC, 1990-5)). The Thamesmead of *Beautiful Thing* is about as far away from lace-curtain flicking territory as it is possible to get; nevertheless, the very architecture and fabric of the estate exerts a profound sense of surveillance throughout the film. For instance, the council towers constantly loom, panoptical, bearing down on the protagonists like huge parental sentinels. The pressure on privacy influences the plot too: the walls between flats are said to be thin enough for Ste's hostile brother to hear his and Jamie's lovemaking; the walkways that connect the flats are a perfect vantage point from where Leah observes – and makes deductions about – the boys' comings and goings; and then there is Jamie's mother Sandra who can (and does) exercise her parental 'right' to search her son's room. It is partly this demonstrable lack of security afforded by Jamie's room that motivate the boys to look for alternative space. But there is also something else. Ste complains: 'it just don't feel right. Here. Your mum and Tony on the other side o'that door. My ole man and Trevor next door. I got an aunty in Gravesend, thought we could go there one night coz she's deaf. But that don't feel right either.' The fact he expresses discomfort at staying in the house of someone who presents no threat of surveillance – not for one night at least – suggests Ste finds his sexuality incongruent with any association with family. Cue Jamie to produce a copy of *Gay Times* with an advert for the Gloucester, a pub in Greenwich. Significantly, his response is not somewhere where they might be able to have sex in secret, but a place where the boys can be together in public – in a space and community that is exterior to their own. The pub provides just this need; it seems they are welcomed with open arms, and the boys subsequently leave in a state of euphoria. Privacy, then, is an impossible battle to be waged with the family, in the family space, and one characterized by constant retreat. The only alternative seems to be to move beyond it and occupy alternative, public space.

Although the Gloucester's drag-act entertainment arguably marks the pub as more of a working-class venue, this move towards affiliation with gay space removed from the family rather militates against Harvey's stated aim of successfully representing a naturalized working-class tolerance of homosexuality. And so the film counters the centripetal movement of the protagonists (although the boys never venture north of the river, the pub in Greenwich is a significant step closer to the centre), and moves towards the enactment of reconciliation back on Thamesmead. Indeed, even *Beautiful Thing*'s promotional material

gestures that Thamesmead is a seat of tolerance. Original promotional posters tempted potential viewers with the notion that the film's principal setting is some kind of gay paradise: the young protagonists sit on a bench with a view over the estate, which is shimmering in the summer heat, replete with rainbow arcing over tower blocks and a pink sky. Ste's arm over Jamie's shoulder demonstrates their relaxed outness in their local environment (figure 2.1). This image does more than just convey the much commented upon 'feel good' ambience of the film; it picks out two central motifs: for a few scenes there is indeed a rainbow over Thamesmead, and the film concludes with the boys' intimate and very public physical contact: their dancing in the estate's central piazza.

The rainbow that breaks out near the opening of *Beautiful Thing* may be interpreted in two ways: as a truanting Jamie saunters back home, its appearance over his block heralds the birth of his and Ste's new gay life, which gets off to a fine start in Jamie's bedroom – a sort of modern, queer version of the star over the stable. Yet, in later scenes the rainbow is viewed from their flats' walkway and so appears behind and beyond the estate (the 'ends' of a rainbow are always ever distant, after all), a premonition perhaps of their quest to find gay space beyond the stifling confines of Thamesmead. This repositioning is typical of the ambivalent signification of the suburbs in British coming-out stories, since the suburban environment is required to be demonstrably resistant to and simultaneously embracing of homosexuality.

The film's denouement, however, is superbly upbeat and 'out': Jamie invites Ste to slow-dance with him on the central piazza. Nowhere could be more public, and a great crowd of Thamesmead residents builds up throughout this final scene. What is more, Sandra, in support of and out of pride for her son, forms with Leah another single-sex dancing couple beside them. The positive response from the swelling audience fuels the film's jubilant finale (the only hostilities come from minor characters that have already been marked as petty or ridiculous); the last stage directions, almost superfluous, suggest the screenwriter is beside himself, caught up in the euphoria: 'STE *and* JAMIE *are dancing.* LEAH *and* SANDRA *are dancing. The music pelts out. It's a warm, sunny day.*'[27]

It is hard not to cheer the four for this act of pride and bravery (Jamie, in particular, has been the target of homophobic bullying from boys who live locally). Yet, it is only made possible by three things. Firstly, Ste's violent family are absent (Jamie warily checks that

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[27] Jonathan Harvey, *Beautiful Thing: A Screenplay by Jonathan Harvey* (London: Methuen, 1996), p. 89.
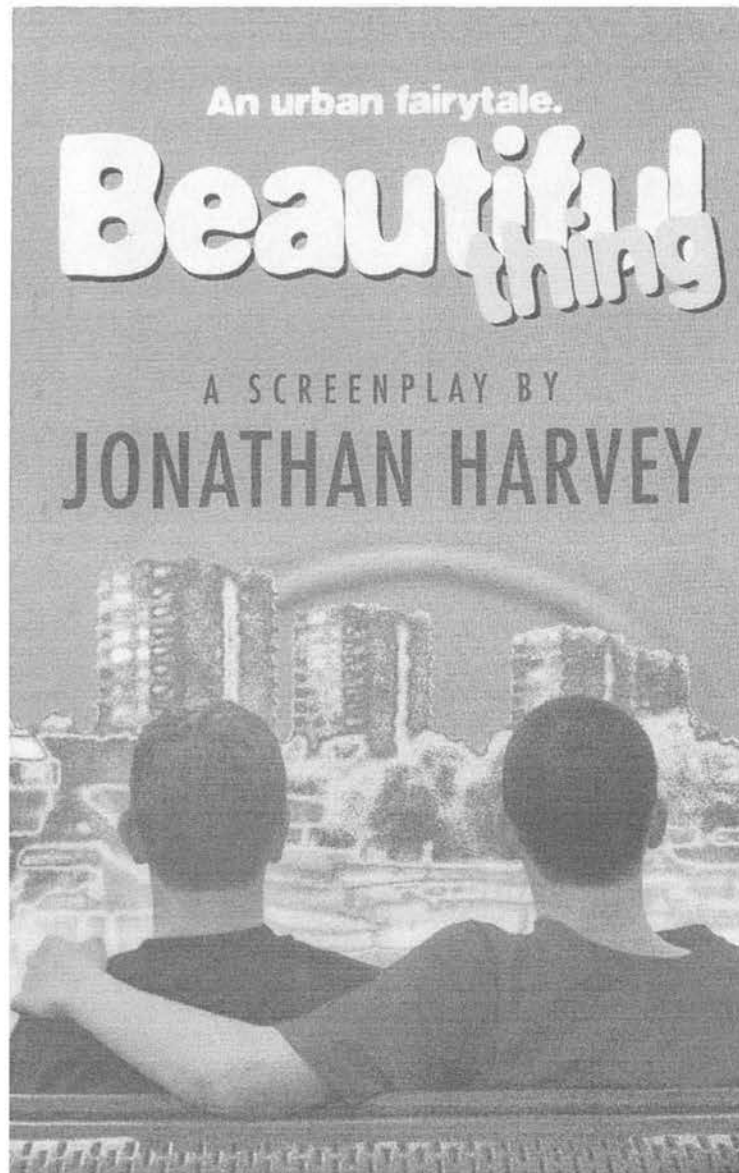
Figure 2.1 Publicity image for *Beautiful Thing*
(from cover of Screenplay, London: Methuen Film, 1996)

the coast is clear beforehand); secondly, the four of them are about to move off to a gay space; without the Gloucester as a destination, they would not have been in mind to act so boldly in their local environment. The dancing is then, in a sense, only a warm up. Thirdly, and most significantly, they are about to leave Thamesmead permanently: Sandra has secured the license of a pub in Rotherhithe, and hence they do not have to deal with any future homophobic backlash. So, although the public gay presence on Thamesmead ends up being as prominent as possible, it is only fleeting. In fact, it is not just the gay characters who wish to escape the estate. Leah dreams of educational opportunities elsewhere (her

plans fall through; presumably she is left behind on Thamesmead by the other characters). Sandra is caught muttering that she cannot wait to get off the estate and her new pub is an upmarket establishment in a middle-class area. Identifying this character's upward aspiration is not in itself meant as a criticism. But by effectively declaring her disloyalty to Thamesmead, Sandra's acceptance of Jamie's homosexuality becomes individualized; it ceases to be transferable to the estate, which is what her dancing with Leah seems to have achieved. Revealingly, Sandra also distracts attention from her social progression by explicitly making a connection between her own struggles as an under-privileged single mother and Jamie's experience of being bullied for being gay, and further so when she unceremoniously dumps her hopelessly middle-class boyfriend immediately after asking him, rhetorically and angrily, 'what have you ever had to fight for in your life?' By re-emphasising her working-class credentials, Sandra's abandonment of Thamesmead seems less like class treachery.

The conclusion of *Beautiful Thing*, then, belies a desire to reinstate the trajectory of the conventional (American) coming-out story. The film similarly wavers between seeking toleration from the suburban community, and the acceptance from individuals who are more than prepared to abandon that same community. Arguably the conjunction of the two trajectories weakens the film's aims. The transition from the private spaces of Thamesmead to its public ones proves to be little more than a raid. The singular declarative act at the end of *Beautiful Thing* is rendered ineffectual. Whilst it is the perfect euphoric spectacle, it does little to redirect the imagination towards lasting social transformation, a suspicion seemingly confirmed by the principal characters' rapid and permanent evacuation of Thamesmead.

From Cul-De-Sac to Open Road: Coming Out American-Style in *Get Real*

Get Real, released two years after *Beautiful Thing*, more or less replays the earlier film's narrative dual trajectory, with re-issues of the same teenage and parental (stock) characters. And despite being set in a very middle-class fringe of the new town of Basingstoke, *Get Real*'s suburban location does much the same work as Thamesmead in *Beautiful Thing*, becoming the site of declaration and reconciliation between the gay teen and his friends and family.[28]

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[28] Strangely, in discussions of *Get Real*'s location the word 'suburban' often seems unmentionable, despite repeated references to aspects which are widely understood to be connoted by that adjective. For instance, as

Like *Beautiful Thing*'s Jamie, *Get Real*'s sixteen year-old protagonist Steven is at ease with his sexuality from the film's opening, despite similar punishments from peers at school. Early scenes see Steven cottaging, with a degree of confidence, in a public toilet in the local park. The only problem with being gay, the film seems to argue, is nothing to do with homosexuality *per se*, but arises instead from the falseness of relationships that derive from its concealment. The only way to resolve this tension is through public disclosure, which, as in *Beautiful Thing*, must take place in the local suburban environment, i.e. at 'home'. The trajectory from secrecy to disclosure is inevitable because there is ultimately nowhere to hide in the suburbs: every area is under surveillance; but equally, escape to the big city is inconceivable, as ties to family are too strong to be severed.

The only exceptional location, where homosexual activity continues unchecked, is the park cottage. It is here where Steven meets his lover John, surprising each other as they emerge from it in matching school blazers after having exchanged secret messages through cubicle walls. As in Oscar Moore's *A Matter of Life and Sex*, discussed in chapter five, suburban cottaging requires a double life, but *Get Real* is much more straightforward in its resolution – and condemnation – of this duality. Steven later runs into Glenn, an older man who picked him up at the cottage at the film's opening, only to quickly abandon the love-struck teenager. Glenn's bad faith is clearly punished: in the shopping mall-located photography suite of Steven's father, he is revealed to have a wife and child. After reproaching her husband for wearing the jacket he knows she hates (Glenn is wearing the outfit he goes cottaging in), the wife poses with a brittle smile; he hunkers down, glowering, with the baby, inevitably, screaming: a portrait of familial disharmony.

If the cottage, the only secure gay suburban site, is disgraced by its inauthenticity, all other locations are homophobically policed. Disclosure at school seems to be completely out of the question: head boy super-athlete John is best friends with those who queer bash Steven (without knowing he is gay). In his cul-de-sac, Steven and his best friend and confidante Linda seem wary of nosy passers by as they discuss his sex life. However, at the same time, they enjoy parodying the same sense of suburban surveillance. (Steven: 'What

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Michael Williams summarizes, 'Basingstoke's New Town identity, "a place people drive past on the M3" as director Simon Shore notes, appears to be a provocative move towards a location *The Village Voice* perceives to be "significantly posher than the South London flats of *Beautiful Thing*, though arguably more stifling." Posher or not, it is a step away from both city and country heritage, as the film's official website argues: 'The filmmakers saw Basingstoke as an opportunity to move away from the gritty social realism prevalent in British films today', with Shore adding that the town has a 'very American' and therefore 'universal' quality about it.' Michael Williams, '"Come Here and Have a Bathe!" Landscaping the Queer Utopia', in Griffiths, *British Queer Cinema*, pp. 105-21 (p. 113).

will the neighbours think?' Linda: 'We are the neighbours!') Nevertheless, John is extremely uneasy about being with Steven in a domestic environment, particularly after a parental grilling over the phone as to his whereabouts. This anxiety prompts the couple's evacuation into the local wood, where they can be comfortable together. But unlike the eternal gay utopia presented by the Greenwood in Forster's *Maurice*, the boys' sylvan seclusion is terminated abruptly. Steven is picked up by the Police later one night and given a lecture 'about the park being out of bounds at night because it's full of disgusting people like us.'

Yet despite not being able to find a place where they can go, neither Steven nor John considers the standard romantic elopement to be the answer to their predicament. The film appears to be conscious of the oddness of their insistence on staying put. At a tiresome wedding reception, Steven pleads with Linda that he wants to return to Basingstoke (in order to see John), upon which Linda retorts, 'Sweetheart, no-one ever wants to go back to Basingstoke.' Later, reunited with Steven and having the run of his parents' house, John inverts the typical teenage elopement impulse:

> JOHN Do you think I could persuade my parents to go live somewhere else?
> STEVEN What do you want to move out of here for?
> JOHN No, pillock! I'd stay here. You could come and live with me.

With no possibility to escape, and with nowhere to hide, the only possible course of action is to come out. As in *Beautiful Thing*, the final coming-out scene is climactic and totally public: every character in the film bears witness to Steven's act of disclosure. But because suburbs generally have few social spaces – and *Get Real*'s Basingstoke is not exceptional in this respect – the concluding public declarative scenes in these coming-out narratives are noticeably manufactured. At the end of *Get Real*, Steven's stage is the school assembly hall, which is holding the prize-giving ceremony that also represents the coming of age of those like John who have completed their secondary education. Steven's acceptance speech for a local newspaper essay prize transforms into an act of self-outing that foregrounds most strongly his wish for his 'actual' self and his community and, particularly, his parents to be reconciled:

> I feel a bit of a fraud. You see I wrote about growing up as I imagined it must be for most of you but there was another article which was to be included in the school magazine but it was censored because it was about a young guy who just happened

to be gay. I – I wrote that article. I wish you could've read so you could understand... this is so difficult. I'm sick of feeling totally alone. I want to have friends who like me for what I am. I want to be part of a family who love me for who I am and not someone I pretend to be to keep their love. I'm sick of hiding, of being sad and scared. If you had any idea – there must be more of you who feel like this, like I do, trying to speak out. Thanks for proving my point. I'm gay. Sorry Mum. Dad. But you can bet your life you're not the only parents out there with a gay son. It's only love. What's everyone scared of? Thanks for listening. [Steven exits to slow applause, which rapid builds to a standing ovation]

Steven's public declaration contrasts obviously with John's insistence on remaining closeted. Indeed, Steven's self-outing, combined with John's physical assault on his lover after being discovered together in a compromising position by his homophobic friends, renders untenable their continued relationship. John is destined to follow in his father's footsteps and progress to Oxford on the strength of his sporting prowess, where it seems he will perpetuate the same lies and cowardice (in one of the woodland scenes he tells Steven quite unselfconsciously that he expects to meet his future wife at University and later have children). Yet the blanket respect granted to Steven for his bravery and sincerity in the assembly hall, which stands for the community's acceptance, is almost perfunctory. The only people who are actively supportive of Steven after his speech – his mother, his best friends – are already on his side (though his mother does subsequently talk down the bullies; it seems the next two years of Steven's life will be mercifully free of homophobic intimidation).

In similar fashion to *Beautiful Thing*, the film ends with visions of suburban escape: Linda drives the hero off into the sunset, to Aretha Franklin's rousing refrain 'freedom', from the song 'Think' (similarly, *Beautiful Thing* signs off with Mama Cass), with Steven throwing redundant 'L'-plates over his shoulder. Public sincerity, then, leads to liberation. The scene is consciously clichéd (although subverted, a little, by the lady driver); their brash American roadster looks out of place on the winding Hampshire lanes. Like many of the high school movie tropes – locker room bullying, doting on the star of track and field etc – much of the film feels foreign and improperly translated; *Get Real* constantly wants to tell two stories, one set in England, the other in California. Actually though, its slightly more sophisticated ending reverses the conclusion of *Beautiful Thing*, where the sun sets on the protagonists' public happiness in their home setting, which deflects the viewer from the fact of their immanent departure. Steven's road trip, on the other hand, distracts attention from his desire, in his own words, 'to be part of a family who love me for who I am';

Steven will almost certainly be back in time for supper. Nevertheless, its pseudo-road movie ending suggests that *Get Real* retains a degree of anxiety about gay suburban existence. The figure of the gay teenager seemingly cannot be left alone in the family-occupied cul-de-sacs of places like Basingstoke. Once again, the reassurance afforded by singular declarative flourishes in the suburbs is only very temporary.

Banal Street Blues and Big Exits in *Queer as Folk*

In many respects, the television drama *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4, 1999), along with its sequel, *Queer as Folk 2* (2000), differs markedly from the two coming-out films discussed above. Firstly, the series is set in Manchester and its environs, and unlike the wholly suburban-located *Beautiful Thing* and *Get Real*, most of the action in *Queer as Folk* takes place in and around Canal Street, the 'gay village' situated in central Manchester. Secondly, the televisual format of *Queer as Folk* means that it is a lot longer than the two films (the combined running time of the original series and its sequel comes in at about three and a half times the length of either *Beautiful Thing* or *Get Real*). The series length, combined with its episodic structure, would suggest that there is more scope for exploring the future implications of dramatic moments like public acts of coming out, as demanded by Michael Bronski.[29] And thirdly, whilst *Queer as Folk* is indisputably a seminal gay television drama, it is seemingly more than just a coming-out story. One of the three principal characters Nathan Moloney clearly does have much in common with the likes of Jamie or Steven: a gay teenager, at the receiving end of homophobic abuse at school, and all but ready to burst out of his suburban closet. But the other two gay protagonists Stuart and Vince are twice Nathan's age and seemingly stalwarts of the Canal Street scene. And indeed, it seems that the series presents a stark and sometimes antagonistic divide between the gay city centre and what amounts to the straight suburbs, in keeping with the many American texts examined so far. Canal Street appears to be synecdochic of Mancunian urbanity, mostly because no other forms of life in the city are visible (at least, not unless deeply involved with the gay scene: Vince's mother is perhaps the greatest of all 'scene queens' – 'best night of my life, my son comes out, and I find all this [the Village]'; Stuart's city-based PR job is seemingly just an extension of his life on the scene, enabling him to entertain clients on Canal Street or to simply cruise them in the office). A study of

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[29] The original series comprises of eight, approximately thirty minute episodes, with the sequel providing two further, slightly longer, episodes.

audience responses to the representations of sexual space in *Queer as Folk* rather confirms the association between the city centre and homosexuality, one informant commenting that the series 'is getting the city a reputation. People think Manchester is gay. They get a shock when they come here.'[30] Canal Street's domination of central Manchester decentres non-gay space. The only straight social venue to be seen in the entire series, a pub, is flung out in the suburbs. The pub's displacement is compounded by Vince snooping around the venue like a spy in foreign place. He reports back to base (Stuart) with: 'It's all true. Everything we've ever been told. Oh my God, flock wallpaper. Ohhh, and the people! There are people talking in sentences that have no punch-lines and they don't even care. Can you believe it, they've got toilets in which no-one's ever had sex.' The divide between suburb and city centre also foregrounds a central tension in the series' narrative, between questions of responsibility and individual hedonism. The former are usually evoked by suburban locations, whether it be 'the lesbians' in their Didsbury home, who almost perpetually look after the baby that they and Stuart have parented whilst he plays on Canal Street, Vince's supermarket job (which he needs in order to support his mother), or Stuart's shirked obligations to look after either his parents or for that matter Nathan, who has run away from home (also in the relatively affluent Didsbury).

However, these two older men do have significant suburban ties. In both cases, their interaction with suburbs is closeted: Vince has not disclosed his sexuality to his co-workers in the out-of-town supermarket where he works; Stuart, meanwhile, has still not come out to his parents, who live a comfortable, domestic existence in suburban Cheshire. Just like all of the gay teenage characters discussed so far, the closeted, suburban aspects of the older men's lives cause emotional discomfort. Vince's continued concealment of his sexuality confuses and severely embarrasses a female colleague who takes a shine to him, and Stuart's results in his emotional estrangement from his parents and even an attempt to blackmail him from one of his nephews. Much of the dramatic substance of *Queer as Folk* is given over to exploring the unfortunate consequences of closetedness, and their resolution, which again is achieved through climactic, public declarations. (Stuart's own coming-out scene actually takes place in his sister's new home, but in front of his entire

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[30] See Beverly Skeggs, Leslie Moran, Paul Tyrer and Jon Binnie, '*Queer as Folk*: Producing the Real of Urban Space', *Urban Studies*, 41 (2004) 1839-56, (p. 1846). Ironically, the report shows how, at the same time, many habitués of Manchester's Village complain that *Queer as Folk* has encouraged an influx of straight 'tourists' into Canal Street, which threatens its most important function as providing a visible safe and, to some extent, community space for gays.

extended family. Moreover, its form, a startlingly hyperbolic litany of derogatory synonyms for gay – a brief sample: 'I'm a bumboy, batty boy, backside artist, bugger; I'm bent. I am that arse bandit, I lift those shirts...' – comes across as a kind of parody of support group-cum-Oprah Winfrey-style talk show disclosure.) One subplot even sees previously 'out' characters strategically revert to the closet, with disastrous consequences. The lesbians attempt to reorganize their living arrangements to mimic a heterosexual household, in order to help a straight male friend who is threatened with deportation. Whether or not their motivations are commendable, the unfortunate fallout of the scenario (investigation by the authorities, their Ghanaian friend being led away into custody) suggests that 'playing straight' is not maintainable even in the heterosexual environment of suburbia.

With its numerous coming-out narrative strands *Queer as Folk* bears similarities to *Beautiful Thing* and *Get Real*: suburbs in these coming-out stories constitute the most fecund site for negotiation, and ideally, reconciliation, between gays and straight society, but they do not necessarily entail a durable or satisfactory gay suburban presence. Actually, the narrative extension of *Queer as Folk 2* does touch upon aspects of being out in the suburbs. Certainly, coming-out is no panacea: at school, Nathan must continue to defend himself single-handedly from the homophobia of both fellow pupils and teachers; Vince is undoubtedly more comfortable at work after coming-out, but there is a strong suggestion that his superiors give preference to a heterosexual colleague when it comes to opportunities for promotion. Also in the series' sequel, Stuart engages in an act of suburban terrorism, blowing up the car of the homophobic mother of a friend, right outside her own doorstep in a slumbering cul-de-sac. The blanket rapprochement of the other two films, it would seem from this scene, is quite unobtainable. However, Stuart's act of coming-out to his family does bring them closer together. (His mother does exclude him from a future family gathering because his young nephews will be there, after seemingly being disturbed by the news of her son's sexual involvement with the fifteen year-old Nathan. Stuart's father, who continuously presses gently for more contact between Stuart and the family, insists she will come round eventually, however.)

Stuart's declaration, though, ultimately precipitates his evacuation from Manchester altogether. The new potential for proximity to his parents only serves to reinforce the sense of his own mortality and his disgust for domesticity. Stuart's nausea is further fuelled by Vince's imminent transformation to 'straight' suburbanite: his hard won promotion has instilled in him a strong sense of occupational and financial responsibility, particularly for

his 'dependents' (his mother and friends). Coupled with the realization that he is no longer the young star of the scene, Stuart, accompanied by Vince (having at the last minute fled his supermarket), exchange Canal Street for the open road in some vast American desert. In doing so they are following Vince's advice 'go straight ahead and out, keep moving. Can't settle down if you don't have to stop.' Vince's sudden restlessness allays Stuart's fears about being ossified into domesticity, becoming 'an old married couple'. There is to be no return to straight, dull suburbia, so the only alternative is to avoid being in any one place at all. In a bizarre fusion of cinematic genres (science-fiction, western and road movie), Vince and Stuart's big exit is an escape fantasy: Stuart's jeep blasts out of Canal Street like a spacecraft then teleports its occupants to a parallel dimension, the desert highway. In doing so, they manage to escape both suffocating responsibility and tired hedonism, respectively represented by 'marriage' and a job in the suburbs, and the Canal Street scene. The men become 'good' outlaws, tied to no place and ever ready to defend their public queerness from any redneck homophobe as they disappear off into the sunset. *Queer as Folk*'s use of the open road motif is identical to *Get Real*'s: it points to the possibilities and uncertainties of their future existence, instead of the predictable routine of life back home. The series' discomfort with the thought of any future gay suburban habitation is even more explicit than *Get Real*'s; correspondingly, with the sudden muddling of genres, it casts the fantasy exit sequence even more obviously *as* fantasy.

The suburban location of these recent coming-out stories is not the only aspect that distinguishes them from earlier kinds. If the introspective or accessional-type narratives such as *A Boy Named Phyllis* and *A Boy's Own Story* ostensibly follow a relatively strict linear progression from provincial isolation to integration within a gay community in the metropolis, each of the gay teenagers discussed above is able to rely on at least one ally in suburbia. These supporting characters – or sidekicks – are always other apparent outsiders, being either black (Jamie and Ste's neighbour, Leah, and Nathan's school friend, Donna) or overweight (Ben's confidante, Linda). The function of these characters is to deter the narrative from introversion, to show that the gay protagonists are indeed naturally able to build bridges within their home community. The same characters also serve to demonstrate that the gay characters are not the only shows on the road. For example, in *Queer as Folk*, Donna (who is also suffering from a turbulent home life) replies tartly to Nathan's protestations that she can't understand his situation because she's 'part of the fascist heterosexual orthodoxy', with 'I'm black, and I'm a girl, try that for a week'. Nevertheless,

each of the female friends must ultimately be content with a subordinate role (hence my use of 'sidekick'): Donna and Leah are both abandoned; Linda provides this droll commentary during Ben's moment of triumph:

LINDA Steve, I've got a bit of a surprise for you. It's not quite as big a deal as
    you telling the whole world you're gay. But it's a surprise anyway.
BEN Tell me later.
LINDA (*aside*) I know, why don't I tell you later.

The figure of the sidekick is so well-established in suburban coming-out stories as to seem transferable, even reversible. In the Anglo-Asian suburban drama *Bend it Like Beckham* the teenage female protagonist Jesminder – 'Jess' – is best of friends with a gay teenager. His coming out to her brings to the fore that Jess's problem – her football-playing ambitions do not match her parent's notions of what constitutes a suitable future for their daughter in terms of her class, ethnicity and gender – is not the only kind of difficulty one can have with one's parents. One may go further: *Bend it Like Beckham* is remarkably similar to *Beautiful Thing* in terms of structure and symbolism. Jumbo Jets repeatedly flying low over Jess's Hounslow semi evoke her desire for escape, just as the rainbow over Thamesmead does for Ste and Jamie. After realising that his earlier experiences of racism in Britain prevented him from achieving his ambition of becoming a cricketer, Jess's father finally intercedes to help her live her dream, in quite the same manner as when Sandra identifies with her gay son through her past struggles. 'America', once again, represents escape: Jess leaves the suburbs for the United States (where women's football is culturally much more acceptable) immediately after reconciliation.[31] Indeed, perhaps *Beautiful Thing* and *Get Real* both belong to a broader genre of British suburban film which aims to represent *rapprochement* across different cultures and communities. Such a genre depicts contemporary suburbia as both diverse and potentially tolerant, yet simultaneously expresses acute unease about the plight of young people, typically (re)installing an American-style narrative of suburban flight.

In the United States, by contrast, suburbia seems like less fertile ground for coming out or for acceptance generally. The reason for this disparity is fairly obvious: unlike the three British narratives discussed, the suburban settings of American coming-out stories are located in the past. Each of the sissy-boy narratives analysed in the previous chapter is set

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[31] *Bend it Like Beckham*, dir. Gurinder Chadha, Fox Searchlight, 2002.

in the decade in which its author was raised. Despite the reclamation of the sissy as a gay hero, suburbia is itself damned as a homophobic environment. By depicting the suburbs as of the past, in contrast to an accepting urban present, they are rendered forever and inevitably inimical to gay identity.[32]

Also in contrast to their American counterparts, British suburban coming-out films indicate a decisive shift of emphasis away from homosexual and towards heterosexual acceptance of gay identity. Suburbia is the site for this reconciliation for two reasons. Firstly, suburban space is such that homosexuality cannot be kept a secret; privacy is always insecure, forcing gay identification into the public domain. Secondly, the suburbs constitute the environment most easily depicted as being dominated by the heterosexual family. It should be clear that, as a consequence, these coming-out stories do not make any attempt to re-interpret or refashion suburbs in any radical way, other than demonstrating their propensity for tolerance. As distinctly depicted in *Queer as Folk*, the continued straightness of the suburbs means that the urban centre often is, as a result, characterized as a 'natural' repository for gays and lesbians. Suburban coming-out stories are, in part, still structured around the 'metropolitan' model of gay identity.[33]

The British gay narratives examined here have achieved a great deal. They have been extremely popular, thanks in no short measure to their optimism, their contemporariness and their ability to speak of other forms of experience beyond gay identity. Yet, ironically enough, British coming-out stories have an identity problem: they are riven by two narrative trajectories propelled by contrary aims. Whereas American texts productively work in opposing directions – delivering gay identity by leaving the suburbs, but simultaneously recuperating what has been left behind by narrating the suburban past – British ones are hindered by their ambiguity, a consequence of retaining remnants of a

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[32] If the British texts discussed in this chapter belong to a broader genre of texts optimistic about the possibilities of intergenerational and cross-cultural integration in contemporary suburbia, then the likes of *Edge of Seventeen* could equally be said to have much in common with a number of recent American films which positions the suburbs as backwardly dysfunctional by locating them in decades previous. *The Ice Storm* (dir. Ang Lee, Fox Scarchlight, 1997), *The Virgin Suicides* (dir. Sofia Coppola, Paramount, 1999), *Donnie Darko* (dir. Richard Kelly, Newmarket, 2001) and *Far from Heaven* (dir. Todd Haynes, Focus, 2002) are all further examples of the 'retro-suburban' movie and each engages with themes of cultural sterility, and sexual and social repression.

[33] The television drama *Metrosexuality* (Channel 4, 2001), part parody of the contemporary coming-out story, part earnest exploration of the twenty-first century family, reinforces the metropolitanist model of the texts discussed by simply inverting both the narrative's locations and the sexualities of the principal characters. So, suburban cul-de-sacs are swapped for the 'technicolour streets of hip Notting Hill Gate'. Meanwhile the protagonist Kwame is one of the few straight characters in the series – though his two fathers are gay, along with his (white) sidekicks; as one of the show's publicity taglines was 'It ain't easy being straight in the 21st century but hey – someone's got to do it…'

foreign narrative. Indeed, whilst the sissy stories are relatively clear about their dual purpose, tales of coming out in Britain always obscure theirs. The American elements of these narratives are pushed 'outside' the text, i.e., beyond the ending. To explicitly represent flight from the suburbs to the city would counter the central project of the British coming-out stories, to demonstrate the possibility and desirability of reconciliation between gays and straights, and be tantamount to an admission that heterosexual society is unchangeable.

Chapter Three
Wasteland of the Free: New Narrative and the Suburbs

The binary of suburban versus urban and the narrative trajectory from the suburbs to the city constitute vital organizing principles in the formation of gay identity. However, virtually all coming-out stories – the primary vehicle for representing the reification of gay identity – devote considerably more attention to suburban places than urban ones. In the previous two chapters, suburbia has been identified as a site that is deployed in gay narratives in order either to help envisage a broadened gay subculture, as evinced by numerous American 'sissy-boy' stories, or else to demonstrate the possibility of mutual acceptance between gays and straights, which appears to be the primary aim of recent British coming-out films.

'All narrative is corrupt': New Narrative's Drive for Authenticity

One identifiable group of queer cultural producers, the so-called 'New Narrative' writers, who together comprise a radical late-twentieth-century North American literary movement, are discernibly ill-disposed towards traditional modes of gay narrative. As the various critics encountered in the previous chapter attest, hostility towards the coming-out story is hardly a unique position. Many New Narrative writers' suspicions of 'gay narrative', though, are prompted not so much by the genre's various exclusions, but derive instead from a broader anxiety about the limitations and inauthenticity of narrative, and, in particular, the challenges of narrating sexual desire. As Kevin Killian, a poet and novelist closely associated with the New Narrative movement, declares, 'All narrative is corrupt insofar as it attempts to ape the realities of our lives.'[1] Conventional gay narratives come in for especial criticism; they are considered inadequate, quite unable to represent the political realities and lived experience of sex and sexuality (as well as AIDS). Killian says of fellow New Narrative writer Sam D'Allesandro, for instance: 'He felt compelled to write out of his own life materials [...] He wanted to change some lives but knew he wasn't going to do so by the same old same old, boy meets boy, a glass falls off the table, things will never be the same again.'[2] Out of a concern for the failings of narrative, and in an attempt to construct new ways of narrating homosexualities, some New Narrative writers have

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[1] Kevin Killian, 'Sex Writing and the New Narrative', *The Sodomite Invasion Review*, 13 (1990) 13.
[2] Ibid.

challenged or reworked the suburban-urban trajectory of traditional gay fiction. Certain novels by Killian and Dennis Cooper, especially, present suburbs as propitious sites, as inspirational landscapes, capable of generating new and rewarding potentialities.

The New Narrative movement constitutes an avant-garde little known outside the literary milieu of its base in San Francisco. As the writer Dale Peck somewhat dryly comments, 'New Narrative was a term that [...] had meaning only if you were already acquainted with it.'[3] New Narrative's low profile probably owes much to its own reticence towards being named, particularly during its first fifteen years of activity, from the mid-seventies onward. Robert Glück recalls that 'once New Narrative began to resemble a program, we abandoned it, declining to recognize ourselves in the tyrants and functionaries that make a literary school.'[4] Two figures associated with the movement, Dennis Cooper and Kathy Acker, have achieved a degree of international luminosity, but otherwise New Narrative writers, though still active today, remain occluded by the gay literary mainstream.[5] But it is the willingness of these writers to engage and unpick the predominantly realist narrative conventions of gay fiction that makes them significant rather than their sheer presence. Of particular relevance to the analyses of the previous chapters is the way New Narrative frequently addresses the spatiality of dominant gay genres, and how certain texts are able to identify suburbia as a productive resource and, even, as a site of creative inspiration. For these reasons I will argue that, in spite of their

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[3] Dale Peck, 'The Lost Generation', *New York Magazine*, 7 February 2005,
http://newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/arts/books/reviews/10964/ [accessed 1 August 2005].
[4] Robert Glück, 'Long Note on New Narrative', *Narrativity*, 1 (no date),
http://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/issue_one/gluck.html [accessed 25 May 2005]. As late as 1989 this anonymity was still being enforced: reviewing Killian's novel *Bedrooms Have Windows*, Sarah Schulman suggests the author is 'part of an evolving literary movement that has yet to be named' (Sarah Schulman, 'Lust on Long Island', *Outweek*, 29 October 1989, p. 60). Yet Gregory Bredbeck recounts an anecdotal story of the movement's naming, which took place in 1980, though Bredbeck rather confirms New Narrative's own elusiveness by describing the story as apocryphal (Gregory W. Bredbeck, 'The New Queer Narrative: Intervention and Critique', *Textual Practice*, 9 (1995) 477-502 (p. 478)). Some writers' suspicion of any literary nomenclature has been outright, with Kathy Acker reputedly responding 'New Narrative? Can't we just call it sex?' (Dodie Bellamy, 'Can't We Just Call it Sex?', *Alt-X*, 1996,
http://altx.com/EBR/EBR3/DODIE.HTM [accessed 6 June 2005]. Glück, however, admits now to being pleased that a younger generation of writers and critics are using the term with regard to their own work (Glück, ibid.).
[5] It appears to be usual practice to introduce discussions of New Narrative with a list of associated writers, acknowledging the existence of an inner core as well as their multi-disciplinarity. Bruce Boone and Robert Glück are continually cited as being central figures; a little self-consciously, Killian refers to Glück as 'our General' and Boone as 'our other General' (Gary Sullivan, 'Kevin Killian Interview', *readme*, 2001, http://home.jps.net/~nada/killian.htm [accessed 15 August 2005]). Other New Narrative practitioners not yet mentioned include, in no particular order: Gary Indiana, Dorothy Alison, Eileen Myles, David Wojnarowicz and Dodie Bellamy.

formal dissimilarities, New Narrative texts actually share with conventional coming-out stories a desire to show how the suburbs and suburban life can be instructive.

New Narrative writers are generally centred in certain North American cities: in the Bay Area particularly but also Los Angeles, New York and Montreal. According to Gregory Bredbeck, most originally came from small towns and suburbs, residing in metropolises 'as a result of personal diasporic movements'.[6] Bredbeck's characterisation of this migration is oxymoronic: a diaspora denotes the scattering of a group of people; it cannot sensibly refer to individual relocation. It rather seems that Bredbeck is ascribing a sense of collectivity to these individual journeys retrospectively, in quite the same way that coming-out stories do. Moreover, as discussed in the introduction, the convergence of people from disparate geographies on a particular city or cities is better understood as a 'reverse diaspora'. These urban congregations of artists and intellectuals are altogether reminiscent of the more extensive movement of gay and lesbian people – Kath Weston's 'great gay migration'[7] – to the very same cities, and the association prompts Edmund White to muse on how 'being gay is a bit like being a writer':

> Like most writers, most gays are urban, at least in the years necessary for consolidating their identity. [...] The city is the big human market-place that allows even quite strange people to seek out those of fellow feeling; it offers the economic independence, the anonymity and the randomness needed to sponsor original styles of life. Writers drift to the big city and learn how a writer lives from observing others of his kind, just as homosexuals perfect their values and manners by imitating older exemplars.[8]

In the case of the broadly sexually dissident New Narrative writers, the erotic and creative potentialities of the city coalesce. Indeed, the movement grew out of the brave new subcultural formations of the Post-Stonewall 1970s, when, according to Robert Glück, 'gay identity was [...] in its heroic period.' In his 'Long Note on New Narrative', Glück recalls that 'in the urban mix, some great experiment was actually taking place, a genuine community where strangers and different classes and ethnicities rubbed more than shoulders',[9] which echoes White's comments about the city's capacity to foster 'original styles of life'.

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[6] Bredbeck, 'The New Queer Narrative', p. 478.
[7] Kath Weston, 'Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration', *GLQ: A Jounal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2 (1995), 253-77.
[8] *The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction*, ed. Edmund White (London: Faber 1991), p. x.
[9] Glück, 'Long Note on New Narrative'.

In the heady days of the 1970s, gay identity, still unformed and untested, helped sponsor radical forms of writing. However, even by the 1980s, many New Narrative writers were aware and increasingly critical of the tendency towards what had become the unquestioning conformity of gay urban culture and the literary output of the gay mainstream. Several writers have been vocal in their derision of or sense of alienation from the gay 'scene'. For instance, the writer and artist David Wojnarowicz insists he 'never felt kinship with the gay community, at least the visible gay community, except for what we all have to endure. I just can't relate.'[10] A posthumous review of his life and work argues that Wojnarowicz was intellectually and creatively 'driven by a desire for justice more than by a particular agenda; he insisted upon challenging and dismantling what he termed a "pre-invented existence," which discriminates and imposes hierarchies on the bases of sexual preference, race, ethnicity [class and] gender'.[11] Yet, there is also a sense that the movement owes much to urban gay life, in all its aspects. Glück insists, for instance, that the '[gay] community was not destroyed by commodity culture, which was destroying so many other communities; instead, it was founded in commodity culture. We had to talk about it.'[12] This compulsion to engage with the experience of commodification partly explains these writers' preoccupation with the ephemera of a consumerist age. The repeated invocation of pop-culture totems, indeed, the aesthetic nutriment that trash culture seems to provide, has led New Narrative writers to be characterized as possessing a post-modern sensibility.[13] The abandonment of historical context, commingling of the highbrow with the banal – Critical Theory and candy bars, Emily Dickinson with *International Penthouse* – along with non-linear narrative strategies, the blurring of character and author, and attempts to destabilize the relationship between reader and writer have all contributed to this assessment. But it is the challenge of representing new permutations of sex, and sexual identity and politics that provides the primary drive behind these alternative narrative strategies.

Glück suggests that new narrative techniques are partly necessitated by the very corporeality of desire, claiming that he 'wanted to write close to the body – the place

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[10] Quoted in Ben Gove, *Cruising Culture: Promiscuity, Desire and American Gay Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 132-3.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Glück, 'Long Note on New Narrative'.
[13] E.g, Bredbeck, 'The New Queer Narrative', p. 479.

language goes reluctantly.'[14] But he recalls how the motivation to develop a new mode of writing was also spurred by the total absence of expressions of his own experience of the world in not only the work of the then dominant avant-garde, the Language poets, but also of culture generally: 'Whole areas of my experience, especially gay experience, were not admitted to this utopia, partly because the mainstream reflected a resoundingly coherent image of myself back to me – an image so unjust that it amounted to a tyranny that I could not turn my back on.' It is as much the coherence of the mainstream construction of subjectivity as its projected straightness that forces Glück's rejection. He declares 'I wanted to write with a total continuity and total disjunction since I experienced the world (and myself) as continuous and infinity [sic: infinitely?] divided.' Equally, gay subculture is not experienced as an entirely coherent phenomenon. Whilst the deployment of a 'provisionally stable identity' crucially enables political agency, the gay community is perceived as 'speaking to itself dissonantly',[15] an observation that prompts one of the central tenets of New Narrative, that texts be self-reflexive metatexts, declaring their limitations, artificiality, and inconsistencies.

The same discordance and incoherence is less commonly found in more mainstream gay writing; gay urban communities, as we have seen in the previous two chapters, are nearly always presented as liberating or restrictive, welcoming or haughtily self-contained. In the conventional coming-out story, moreover, gay identity neatly coheres around the trajectory of suburban-urban: the escape into a metropolitan horizon signifies a release from the hegemony of heterosexuality. In projecting a gay urban future, these conventional narratives are effectively participating in what Bredbeck describes as 'gay critique', that is, reproducing the normative narrative of homosexuality, but working against the dominant mode or representation by providing an alternative resolution. In short, the desire to implement gay critique is 'the desire to use a system to enact a system that is different.'[16] Bredbeck offers up the likes of Ann Bannon's 1962 working-class lesbian pulp novel *Beebo Brinker* and E. M. Forster's *Maurice* (published posthumously in 1971) as prime examples of gay critique. The melodrama of the former seems as if it will conform 'with publishing standards of the day, which dictated that lesbian and gay desire could be represented providing that it end in tragedy.' But in the concluding pages the eponymous

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[14] Glück, ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Bredbeck, 'The New Queer Narrative', p. 482.

protagonist is saved from bitterness by a more experienced woman who promises to teach her that 'lesbian love doesn't have to be brief and heartbreaking.'[17] Forster's novel concludes with Maurice's evacuation into the infamous 'Greenwood' with his lover the game-keeper Scudder. The pair depart leaving behind no trace of themselves at the Penge estate of Maurice's early love interest Clive, who having eschewed his homosexuality, represents a return to the normative moral and sexual order. Maurice and Scudder's sylvan flight constitutes an alternative outcome to the spiritual and sexual death of Clive's moral restitution, though one that is romantic and improbable. In a similar fashion, the coming-out story reconfigures narratives, of which Vidal's City and the Pillar (1948) or Baldwin's Giovanni's Room (1956) are typical, which see their protagonists struggling with their homosexuality, who end up isolated and unhappy, a situation exacerbated by their rejection of gay subcultures. But, like Beebo Brinker and Maurice, the coming-out story writes beyond its ending, invoking a resolution that foregrounds the restrictiveness of the dominant conventions of representing homosexuality.

Gay critique contrasts with queer critique, which engages with a system of representation and narration, not in order to produce an alternative system, but rather to demonstrate the dangers of systematicity itself. New Narrative, or 'the new queer narrative', as Bredbeck would have it, seeks to demonstrate that 'all desires for immanence and coherence are always already implicated within the maintenance of hegemony.'[18] Returning to the question of responding to the commodification of gay subculture, Glück offers perhaps a more concrete example of how sexually dissident writing is likely to always inhere in the dominant structures of power. He insists that 'writing can't will away power relations and commodity life; instead, writing must accept its relation to power and recognize that at present group practice resides inside the commodity.'[19] Rather than seeking to escape to an alternative site that is as falsely cohesive as the dominant, indeed, which is inevitably incorporated within the dominant, political artistic practice is obliged to work from the 'inside', rendering viewable narrative and narrativity as artificial, as figures.

New Narrative, then, prioritizes questions of authenticity – in brief, how narrative misrepresents lived experience – over envisaging political and cultural change. These two modes are by no means entirely incompatible. Alternative potentialities, such as 'gay

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[17] Ibid, p. 481.
[18] Ibid., p. 487.
[19] Glück, 'Long Note on New Narrative'.

identity', may still be strategically useful even though – or, rather, only after – they are understood to be constructs. But the movement's scepticism of identity categories and other similarly artificial designations leaves it less able to produce images of futurity than conventional gay narratives. Instead, New Narrative texts are much more likely to engage in postmodern techniques which typically negate the possibility of imagining development and change. Unlike gay critique, New Narrative fictions never 'write beyond the text'; either they loop back into themselves revealing little else other than their own artifice, or they crumble into the piecemeal details of the everyday life of their protagonist, narrator and/or author (and more often than not, the boundaries between each are indistinct), rendering the future, and virtually everything else, unknowable.

Yet there is one site, suburbia, which offers a kind of opening, not as an escape route to an alternative realm, but rather a space of fecund indeterminacy. Several New Narrative texts find inspiration in the suburbs, and it is precisely the aspects that are routinely denigrated in more conventional texts – particularly the supposed sterility of the environment, along with the sense that suburbia lacks any history – that provide intellectual and aesthetic nourishment. The very blankness of suburban subdivisions provides creative opportunity, rather like the figurative 'blank canvas'. The suggestion of the latter metaphor is not to imply that suburbs are to be rewritten or recast, however. In the texts investigated in this chapter, suburban environments are at most adumbrated; to do more would re-inscribe a singular, unified vision, and could only diminish their potential to foster visions of further texts and new hopeful places unspecified.

The attractiveness of the indeterminacy and a-historicity of the suburbs is not limited to New Narrative writers, nor to a specifically postmodern sensibility. In the work of numerous and varied poets writing in English from the 1970s to the 1990s, Stan Smith identifies the paradoxical appeal of suburbia: 'it offers a secure base to which the writer nevertheless feels no kind of deep allegiance, no sense of rootedness.'[20] Moreover, relaying the words of Ulster poet Derek Mahon, Smith insists that 'they are "places where a thought might grow," free from the grand narratives that prevent thinking.'[21] It is the perception of the suburbs' lack of fixity and their marginality that enables new ideas and ways of seeing, and ultimately, new ways of living.

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[20] Stan Smith, 'Suburbs of Dissent: Poetry on the Peripheries', *Southwest Review*, 86 (2001), 533-51 (p. 540).
[21] Smith, ibid., p. 547.

Kevin Killian's Suburban Inspiration

The characteristic of suburbs being at once liberating and fertile is crucial to Killian and Cooper. Their fictions frequently begin and end in suburbia, or begin with journeys out of the city to the suburbs.[22] In so doing they defy the 'grand narrative' of gay identity, which posits a near monolithic and often unquestioned individual and collective urban future. Killian's *Bedrooms Have Windows* is, however, presented in the mould of the traditional coming-out story. The book is mostly comprised of assorted social, sexual and emotional episodes from Killian's own suburban boyhood and adolescence on Long Island, New York. These scenes are generally organized chronologically, culminating in a postscript chapter written from the perspective of the adult Killian, now a resident of San Francisco, having come by way of New York City. Whilst structurally similar to the coming-out story, *Bedrooms Have Windows* is little concerned with the development of sexual identity. Despite its sexual content, suburban setting and urban conclusion, *Bedrooms Have Windows* appears to prioritize its protagonist's progress as an artist. Rather than answering how the figure of Kevin Killian grew up to be gay, the novel seemingly addresses how he became a writer. Indeed, Killian explicitly denies the meaningfulness of specifically gay autobiography, throwing out comments such as '"Homosexual life?" I couldn't concentrate on what it meant.'[23] But confirming New Narrative's mistrust of all narrative, Killian follows this agnosticism with a broader doubtfulness: 'My own life I viewed, perhaps mistakenly, as serious and coherent.' (p. 110) Such general scepticism stalls one autobiographical coherence from replacing another – say, the 'portrait of the artist'-type *bildungsroman* for the coming-out story. Instead, the novel staggers forward (and ultimately, falls back into itself) by way of a series of erotic epiphanies made manifest in the (mostly) suburban habitat.

To an extent, Killian's – and as we shall see, Cooper's – rejection of the coming-out story obliges him to make the most of the landscape on which he has chosen to dwell. In a wholly suburbanized world, a writer is forced to find inspiration amongst malls and cul-de-sacs. Yet all representations of suburbia are inevitably shot through with recycled and clichéd texts and imagery that are liable to stagnate thinking. The blank and unfixed qualities always compete with the conventional and the ossified. For example, suburbia

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[22] Killian's novel *Shy* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1989) opens with a train journey transporting one its protagonists form New York City to a new life and identity in the suburbs of Long Island.
[23] Kevin Killian, *Bedrooms Have Windows* (New York: Amethyst, 1989), pp. 109-10. Subsequent page references are given in parentheses.

may be considered a peripheral space, but it has also long represented a metonym for the apogee of hegemonic social and sexual relations: the heterosexual nuclear family. And if suburbia as a figure of familial perfection has been undermined by representations of exterior conformity concealing interior deviancy or dysfunction, these latter configurations are themselves merely expected and somewhat tired conventions, a staple of mainstream TV sitcoms and serials.

In *Bedrooms Have Windows* as well as in Cooper's *Try*, conventional representations of suburbia are not avoided; indeed, they are impossible to ignore. Instead, the two opposed kinds of interpretation of suburbia, the predictable and the indeterminate, are intimately involved in a continuous and seemingly irresolvable dialectic, which itself rather constitutes a new suburban aesthetic. Killian opens his novel with an introduction to his suburban hometown which refuses to provide anything but contradictions:

> I grew up in Smithtown, a suburb of New York, a town so invidious that I still speak of it in Proustian terms – or Miltonic terms, a kind of paradise I feel evicted from. Smithtown, Long Island, kind of an MGM Norman Rockwell hometown, a place so boring they gave it a boring name... When I was 14 I began to go to New York on a regular basis, sometimes on the train, sometimes hitchhiking there, looking for a jungly eroticism I supposed Smithtown, with its manicured lawns and its country club airs, couldn't afford me. I was right and wrong at the same time. (p. 1)

This excerpt retreads a familiar theme: suburbia as boring and unerotic. Yet Killian avoids replacing one cliché with another, even a slightly less well-worn one. His 'invidious *[...]* paradise' which is at once Proustian, Miltonic *and* Rockwellian, is decorously sterile and possesses a deep, uncivilized sexuality – *all at the same time*. Admittedly, the opposition of 'manicured lawns' with 'jungly eroticism' sounds just a little like the long-in-the-tooth critique of suburbia's superficial blandness concealing multifarious depravity, but the latter side of suburbia neither replaces, nor is judged to be somehow more 'truly' suburban than the former. Indeed, the novel leaves undecided whether the sexualised suburban binary of exterior-interior even ought to be considered interesting. The book's final paragraph is the only section not narrated by Kevin, but instead by George Grey, the estranged love interest of Kevin's youth. George recounts an apparently influential episode where he and Kevin spy on a very suburban carnal scene:

> Once we peered ass-deep in ivy through the slatted wooden blinds of a country cottage. Two men and a woman stood naked within, slathering themselves with food

by-products. It was two in the morning in our middle-class suburb, Smithtown. Kevin's eyes were bugging right out of his head. I envied him his interest in these people, whose bodies weren't svelte, and whose clothes, strewn around the room dotted with lard and oil, showed they shopped at the mall. (pp. 133-4)

Kevin is evidently fascinated by the very suburbanity of the situation; George expresses throughout a detached boredom. It is impossible, however, to empathize with one response over the other. George claims that he and Kevin wrote *Bedrooms Have Windows* together, he has taught Kevin how to write and that his pupil has since turned on him and passed off the novel as his alone. George concludes by retelling the story from the beginning, this time in the first person plural ('*We* grew up in Smithtown', etc); presumably Kevin has done little more for his rewrite than sneakily switch every 'we' for an 'I'. However, George's words appear in the form of a play or film script, and he is in turn responding to a shaky and semi-audible video-recording of Kevin. Neither character then is able to provide authorial legitimacy; both are irreducibly textual.

What might seem like metatextual frivolity is entirely central to Killian's project. The suburbs, or rather, the *texts* of suburbs, are capable of producing other dynamic and interesting narratives, providing suburbia's complex and contradictory textuality is recognized. As we have seen, the likes of Smithtown can inspire a novel if viewed simultaneously through texts as disparate as a poem by Milton and an MGM film. Indeed, the title 'Bedrooms Have Windows' captures the sense of retaining creative vision in a narrowly circumscribed environment, and the eponymous motif recurs throughout the novel. For instance, as their relationship matures, Kevin's middle-aged lover Carey wishes that 'we had no windows, since glass is too thin and lets in and out too much heat and noise.' (p. 12) He continues: 'I remember arguing with him, I asked him how else if not for windows would we be able to see out onto the city streets. I reminded him that they, the streets, were what provided him with most excitement and inspiration. "But I don't need any windows now," he said, "since I fell for you."' (p. 12)

Carey's declaration may sound creepy and asphyxiating, but Kevin acknowledges he possesses the very same contrary desires for vision and enclosure: 'My tendency to welcome the depraved and the vivid into my life quarrelled with a taste for the closed, contained' (p. 72). The above exchange between Kevin and Carey clearly takes place in an urban location (in the older man's apartment somewhere in New York City). But elsewhere there is a sense that the city streets are almost overburdened with stimuli: 'By day or night

New York's a seedy Burroughs kind of place,' Kevin says (as with Smithtown, New York must be mediated through other texts), 'and hurrying down a street I could hardly catch my breath, there were so many affecting things to watch and so much architecture.' (p. 1) 'So many' and 'so much' implies a surfeit that ultimately renders the city indescribable, and which leaves the protagonist as breathless as he might be if he were entrapped by his lover. It is not surprising, therefore, that the novel largely concentrates on episodes that take place on Long Island rather than in New York City.

Similarly, in the Long Island cottage cohabited by Kevin and George, every bedroom has windows, Kevin declares, seemingly to explain the pair's boundless inspiration, their capacity to look in all directions for inspiration. Their inordinate productivity sees an outpouring of novels and madcap suggestions – 'Lets write Ayn Rand', 'lets buy a tobacco farm like Gary Cooper and Lauren Bacall in *Bright Leaf*, 'lets hold a seance and contact Bobby Kennedy' (p. 73). Much of their endeavours re-frame and re-inscribe texts into their suburban environment, such as their rewriting of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* in the local paper's lost and found column.[24] Their habitat of 'steamy jungle bungalows' (p. 77) suggests a successful harnessing of sexual energy, the 'jungly eroticism' previously presumed absent in Long Island suburbia. At the same time, the image conveys overheated enclosure, a roiling hothouse of sex and scribbling. Indeed, Kevin admits that in their secluded fervency, 'we felt outside society.' (p. 74) In response George seems to whisper Kevin a warning with *'don't you know that it's true* [...] *that for me and for you, the world is a suburb?'* (p. 81). Kevin declares that he takes this at 'face value', although it is far from clear what that might be; in any case typically Kevin becomes distracted by his own response, musing on the value of faces and on George's in particular.[25] George's statement might imply that all that the pair have experienced and known is suburban, without

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[24] Elsewhere, Killian expresses a perhaps understandable embarrassment over his juvenilia. Nevertheless, he insists these early projects, in generating so much delight, were germinal: 'When I began to write, with my high school friend Terry Black, we embarked on a series of mutual projects and I had never had so much fun. When I look today at our so called novels ("Love in the Fog," "Laughs in the Cake," "Lulu at the Ritz," and many more, all of which began with "L" for some reason) I just want to curl up and die, they're so juvenile. And yet writing them at that time, in that place, brought me so much pleasure that I wonder if that period wasn't the seed of all my future development.' (Gary Sullivan, 'Kevin Killian Interview'). Once again, Killian's account of his artistic development sounds so similar to the coming-out story's narrative of sexual identity formation. Moreover, the act of authorial collaboration, Killian claims, enables writing to move beyond the entirely 'solipsistic'. Kevin and George's flighty joint projects are in this respect at least, not introverted.

[25] Kevin's wandering attention, which also characterizes the narrative style of the entire novel, does rather suggest the consumption of mind altering substances. Indeed, Killian suggests that the repeated initial letter of the co-written novels referred to in the previous note is a veiled allusion to LSD (Sullivan, 'Kevin Killian interview').

implying whether this is a bad thing, or, that the wider world has become peripheral, perhaps dangerously so, to their own self-absorbed concerns. Again, the designation and implications of the suburban are ambiguous and contradictory. Furthermore, these ambiguities are generative, they inspire new creative directions. To reiterate: the phrase 'Bedrooms have windows', which metonymically represents Kevin's suburban experience, invokes at once the (conventional) act of suburban surveillance, like Kevin's espying of the greasy troika through the ivy, and the importance of retaining access to the (textual) world. As Killian comments, 'Bedrooms have windows to spy into, to comport oneself before, the way you or I might first read a book, then write one.' (p. 78)

Dennis Cooper, Los Angeles and the Evasion of Gay and Mainstream Narratives

Like Killian, Cooper continually foregrounds suburbia's contradictions. In Cooper's novels, however, it is clearer that the perceived emptiness of suburbia is emphatically an advantage. Occasionally, Killian presents a figure from his assortment of eccentric Long Island acquaintances who enables new imaginable potentialities. For instance, one high school peer lives parentless in squalid but inspiring anarchy:

> We were so used to living with our parents and having to cope with their rules and guidance that Chris Bernhardt seemed at once very lucky and the awful example of what would happen without their restrictions. In a way he was the wild child, the blank page, into which we could read whatever scenario we saw or felt or could ever imagine, in relation to our parents, in relation to love, to relation itself. He and they were so stupid they all became the true and ideal. He was a legend in his own time.
> (p. 32)

Typically, Killian cannot but demonstrate the character's inspiring qualities without expressing his contrary nature: Bernhardt is at once fortunate and degraded, both idiotic and an ideal. Cooper, as we shall see, presents similarly revelatory figures, but more often it is the very landscape of suburbia that is valued. In Cooper's novels, it is the suburbs' blandness and blankness that renders them perfect hiding places from oppressively conformist narratives of selfhood. Cooper acknowledges that the predominantly suburban geography of Los Angeles, the city in which he lives and writes, influences his work, and agrees that it can be read 'as a place where received social structures are at their loosest and least defining'. Yet, precisely because it fosters 'the closest Western culture comes to privatized experience', Cooper finds the city does not impose itself on his work: 'You can

write about L.A. and not describe it.' Significantly, the private rhythms of L.A., its secrecy, afford writers tremendous freedoms; Cooper argues that these qualities enable him to achieve 'purity' in his work. [26]

Cooper's interest in the spaces of L.A. is unlike that which motivates the majority of texts that depict suburbs. Generally, suburban environments are presented as the embodiment of mainstream America. Recently there has been a proliferation of films and fiction that explore suburbia in order to examine America's dark heart, particularly after the Columbine high school shootings.[27] Cooper's recent novel *My Loose Thread* is a response to the high school shootings but, as with the rest of his oeuvre, does not aim to be a commentary on the state of the nation. The book avoids all causal explanations for the shootings, e.g., social alienation, or a culture of violence, presumably as being too simplistic. Indeed, Cooper lambastes other high school shooting narratives for being 'grossly generalizing, disrespectful and ha[ving] no interest in the emotional truth.'[28] *My Loose Thread*, originally intended as non-fictional investigation, is a rebuff to these texts. Cooper's own research suggested 'that every single one of those situations was completely different – they were just lumping it all together under these rubrics: bullying, video games and all that stuff.' He continues:

> It's not the truth; the truth is that these are individual kids with individual problems and their problems are completely incomprehensible to everyone including the parents and friends and psychologists, and that's the truth. There's no answer to this thing, and it's best you just try and get as close to an individual as possible, pay as respectful attention to them, and it becomes one incident; it isn't supposed to be about any other incident but that incident and then you have an experience of what they're experiencing and that's the best you can do.[29]

Rather than dissecting his youthful characters, their backgrounds and psychological constitutions, the novel focuses on the confusion of the perpetrators. *My Loose Thread* is an attempt to create a participatory experience, where the manner of the narrative is in thrall to

[26] Interviewed by Richard Canning in *Gay Fiction Speaks: Conversations with Gay Novelists* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 323-4.

[27]*Elephant* (HBO Films, 2003), written and directed by Gus Van Sant, which depicts a high school massacre, is explicitly inspired by the Columbine tragedy. Other recent films such as *Donnie Darko* (Newmarket, 2001), written and directed by Richard Kelly, and *The Virgin Suicides* (Paramount, 1999), directed by Sophie Coppola (who also wrote the screenplay, an adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenides's novel of the same name), are both centred on the high schools of calm, contented suburban communities which conceal sinister psycho-sexual undercurrents – arguably revealing an indebtedness to David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (De Laurentiis, 1986).

[28] From author's interview with Dennis Cooper, Los Feliz, CA, 11 April 2005 (see appendix for transcript).

[29] From author's interview with Cooper.

its characters: when the protagonist is confused or violent, for example, the narrative becomes so.[30]

Of all Cooper's novels, *Try*, set in the San Gabriel Valley north of Los Angeles, engages with suburban space mostly subtly and productively. Cooper shares with *Try*'s protagonist a San Gabriel upbringing, but his selection of this suburban area for the novel's location over the far more notorious ones that lie adjacent is also fitting. The reputations of the San Fernando Valley to the west and the swathes of Orange County suburbia to the southeast have spread nationally and beyond. The former in particular, referred to simply as 'The Valley', has become a national metonym, serving as America's 'favorite symbol of suburbia run rampant.'[31] This role is undoubtedly aided by the Valley's location as Hollywood's backyard, its streets and buildings being utilized as a backdrop for innumerate television programmes and films. (The Valley's on-screen ubiquity, claims Kevin Roderick, explains why many who visit it physically for the first time find that 'they already know the landscape, consciously or not'.[32]) San Gabriel's relatively low profile helps Cooper somewhat to disengage from the discourse of nation that currently pervades suburb-located film and fiction. Its comparative obscurity renders San Gabriel more private, less likely to foster preconceptions. On the other hand, the total anonymity of some suburban settings is maintained precisely in order to present their texts as geographically non-specific, thereby enabling them to be characterized as generically American. The film *American Beauty* is a case in point; as its title suggests, the film attempts to be locally and regionally transcendent: its nameless iterative residential blocks scanned from an aerial scrolling camera are understandable as the adjunctive landscape of any US city; its protagonist, facing an all-too-ordinary midlife crisis, an everyman. The settings of Cooper's novels, even if unnamed, are locatable through regional references and a recognizably south Californian demotic. Angelean suburbia may represent the epitome of a profoundly privatized mode of American life, but by avoiding the more nationally infamous locales, Cooper evades questions of American identity by utilizing this privacy: *Try* escapes into the very suburban blankness that is derided in other texts.

Try follows the exploits of Ziggy McCauley, a teenager struggling not only with his confusing sexuality and his love for his increasingly vulnerable heroin-addicted best friend

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[30] Dennis Cooper, *My Loose Thread* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002).
[31] Kevin Roderick, *The San Fernando Valley: America's Suburb* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Times Press, 2001), ii.
[32] Roderick, *The San Fernando Valley*, ii.

Calhoun, but also with his two gay fathers, who adopted Ziggy in a 'stab at heterosexual bliss', an 'experiment' that seems to have gone badly wrong and broken down into repeated bouts of violent sexual abuse.[33] The blanket suburbanity of *Try* resists two conventional kinds of narratives: the dissection of suburban life as a means of diagnosing national ills, as discussed above, and the standard narrative of gay youth. Cooper avoids the coming-out story partly because its trajectory simply does not apply in a largely suburbanized city. 'The physical make up of Los Angeles is really key to the way my work is structured and the way the narrative works: [...] there's a drive that's also a drift that's really important'.[34] But beyond the necessity of responding to the specific topography of L.A., the conventions of the coming-out story would seem like impositions: 'I didn't want to pollute the work with tropes'; 'Just the idea of having to have that much drama is not interesting to me. I don't like to have to have that decision making and drama that comes with that kind of change'; the coming-out story is 'a distraction, a fakeness, a nonsense.'[35]

The perpetual suburban horizons of *Try* and other novels also fit comfortably with Cooper's often-voiced hostility to urban gay milieus.[36] The traditional escape route for maligned, abused or just bored teens is to the city (though recent studies have explored contemporary concerns about the apparently deleterious effects of bands of alienated and antisocial youth in suburbia, though usually not from the perspective of the disaffected teenager[37]). Ziggy, however, avowedly refuses this well-trodden path; his journeys that criss-cross his own and other neighbourhoods never see him emerge from suburbia. Only Roger, one of Ziggy's adoptive fathers, has secured himself a metropolitan base, and it is to central New York that Roger wishes to transport Ziggy as lover after having dissolved their familial bond and abandoning their suburban location: Ziggy's 'transference East' requires him to 'accept the new post of "lover," keep mum re: our past, thereby legitimizing our love in such a way as to avoid explanations that would inevitably be awkward, even among chums.' (p. 13) Yet Ziggy scuppers his father's designs, by not only successfully demanding that Roger fly out West to see him, but refusing to return with him after he has

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[33] Dennis Cooper, *Try* (New York: Grove, 1994), p. 12. Subsequent page references are given in parentheses.
[34] From author's interview with Cooper.
[35] Ibid.
[36] In short, the consumerism and conformity is antithetical to individual intelligence. Asked to where he would head, if forced to make a choice between a West Hollywood gay bar and a Valley tract house, Cooper responds 'I'm an artist; any artist would choose the tract house. [...] It's really not that hard a question.' From author's interview with Cooper.
[37] E.g. Wayne Wooden and Randy Blaczak, *Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws* (London: Wadsworth, 1994), Dan Korem, *Suburban Gangs: The Affluent Rebels* (Richardson, TX: International Focus Press, 1995).

arrived. For Roger though, the suburban environment that constitutes most of Los Angeles is in itself an alluring prospect that makes the journey worthwhile: as he approaches the city, he realises with irritation that 'L.A. was smogged over that morning, so I was denied the adrenaline rush of floating onto its endless and bleached teenage-boy-peppered grid.' (p. 100) This incident serves rather as a rebuff to the scrolling 'God-shot' of suburban tracts enjoyed by the viewer, who is positioned as a superior outsider, as in *American Beauty*. Here the Angelean landscape successfully hides its teenage inhabitants from the all-seeing eyes of a metropolitan predator.

Cooper's dismissal of the conventional narrative of urban flight and his animosity towards recognizably gay social institutions demonstrate his subcultural affiliations. Certainly, he would not be the first to express discomfort with the term 'gay writer'. But perhaps it would be more accurate to describe his preferred constituency as youth; Cooper insists that he's a teenager except for his age (he is in his fifties).[38] But homo/bisexuality has a vital importance in Cooper's narratives - and not just because it is all-pervasive. Mulling over the respective merits of sleeping with men and women, Ziggy decides that gay sex has a 'great scariness quotient, whereby no two situations are ever alike', unlike sex with women which always seems 'planned in advance [...] preset'; 'when an experience is over, such as now with Nicole, it sort of gradually dilutes into a zillion other people's identical experiences, until Ziggy seems ... used in a way?' (p. 45) Cooper here reflects a principle tenet of New Narrative writing, that sexuality, along with other aspects of human behaviour, must not adopt unquestioningly a 'pre-invented existence', to recall Wojnarowicz's phrase. Like suburbia, Cooper's conceptualization of sexuality is valuable for its lack of fixity.

The bleak Angelean suburbs provide the entire narrative terrain for *Try* because they constitute the natural habitat of teenagers like Ziggy, or 'human beings at their most fiercely alive, most ... evolved' (p. 19) (paradoxically, teenagers are considered advanced precisely because they are unformed – yet another expression of New Narrative's neophilia[39]). At the same time, suburbia is no anarchistic paradise: the lives of Cooper's

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[38] 'The so-called slacker kids in my books are the kinds of people I've known and been close to all my life. I was one, and, except for my age, I'm still one.' Stephen Lucas, 'American Psycho: An Interview With Dennis Cooper', *3:am Magazine*, November 2001, http://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/nov2001/cooper_interview.html [accessed 10 February 2004].

[39] Killian suggests that New Narrative writers were also pre-occupied with adolescence because it facilitated literary experimentation: 'perhaps the sheer, savage *seethe* of the emotions of these boys and girls [helps] the reader find some emotional ground to hold onto while being propelled nearly unwillingly through the

youths are heavily circumscribed by the whims, obsessions and oppressive narratives of adults - parents, predatory older men, teachers and psychologists. As in *Bedrooms Have Windows*, *Try* stages a contest between conventional and innovative readings of the suburbs, though in Cooper's novel this conflict is starkly realised as an often violent generational struggle. For example, Ziggy constantly parrots the restrictive, pessimistic and probably false diagnoses of his school therapist: that he is manic-depressive for instance; and, repeatedly, that he is needy and insecure because of his history of sexual abuse (pp. 184, 195). Elsewhere, the lessons of psychoanalysis are said to be 'ingrained' and 'Big-Brother-ish' (p. 123). More sinisterly, the very spaces and structures of suburbia seem sometimes to be infiltrated by a listening presence, an oppressive adult surveillance. At one point, Ziggy can hear the inside of a house, 'a kind of textured silence, like that "music" his therapist plays in their background.' (p. 7) Even the voids of suburbia, seemingly the kinds of spaces which possess most libratory potential, are liable to be contested.

Suburbs, though, inevitably also house families. The closest *Try* gets to presenting a model of the traditional heterosexual family, however, is through background noise of sit-coms and game shows from the TV; the sound of *Married ... with Children* re-runs is said to be 'the stupidest ... sound ... in ... the ... world.' (p. 180)[40] Otherwise there is only Ziggy's two fathers' failed attempt at building a nuclear family.[41] The ostensible reason for the failure of their 'experiment' is unremarkable: one parent could not stand the domestic set up. Ziggy is left in the hands of his crasser and more violent father, Brice, who apparently starts sexually abusing him from the age of eight years old. Both familial set-ups are castigated, not simply because they may entail violence, but rather for the reason that they are predicated on inherited, *unexamined* narratives of human interaction. Roger, Ziggy's much more sophisticated if obsessive father provides commentary on both kinds: 'The family unit', he says, 'is an inherently fascist and oddball construction - private, sacred, untrespassable, nobody's business except those involved.' (p. 182) Meanwhile,

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intricacies of formal experiment. It's common sense that you have to give your reader something while you're kicking his ass up and into a higher or more diffuse aesthetic field.' In correspondence with author (see appendix for full transcript).

[40] *Married ... with Children* (Fox, 1987-97) represents one of several sitcoms of the eighties and nineties that attempted to 'parody the now-classic suburban sitcoms of the 1950s only to recreate in detail for new audiences the very conventions of suburban life they ostensibly subvert' William Sharpe and Leonard Wollock, 'Bold New City or Built-up Burb? Redefining Contemporary Suburbia', *American Quarterly*, 46 (1994) 1-30 (p. 18).

[41] Ziggy's having gay parents 'was a bit of joke attack on gay couples modeling themselves on heterosexual relationships, not taking advantage of being gay and leading an unplanned and adventurous life, which is what ideally we should all do.' From author's interview with Cooper.

intrigued by his ex-partner's predilection for Old West-themed furnishings, memorabilia and pulp-fiction, whose house has become a sort of Wild West 'theme-park-in-a-tract-house', Roger realizes that Brice believes he has 'unearthed an official, historical grounding of sorts for his lack of morality' which means that 'safe in his dim re-creation of a lawless utopia, Brice could lord his foul moods over Ziggy et al.' (pp. 122-3). Once again, it is not so much Brice's brutality that Roger is critical of (and fascinated by), but his utilization of inauthentic narratives - his Wild West decor is after all already transposed and 'romanticized and muted' (p. 121) via the myth-making machine of Hollywood.

Contesting Suburban Interiority

As with Brice's living arrangements and Ziggy's experiences of sex with girls, even some of the most basic elements of language are found to be predetermined, loaded with meaning beyond the speaker's control. In declaring his feelings for Calhoun, Ziggy is unable to find words that are not secondhand, that he can himself wield for his own purposes: 'there's so much he wants to clarify, and every possible word he could use seems so clunky, etc., that it's more like he's saying some prewritten, incomprehensible prayer which has nothing to do with how weird he feels while he's pronouncing it.' (p. 199) This frustration with the prescriptiveness of language fosters a strangely intense passivity, which in turn prompts a keen interest from others about that person's interiority. Roger elevates passivity to an aesthetic of the highest order, explaining his anal-eroticism thus:

> What *is* the source of my interest in asses? [...] I would hazard a guess that this little fixation involves an avoidance of more resolute body parts, namely the face and the genitalia, both of which, while fascinating, present too much personality, thereby reinforcing my failure to penetrate the givens of people I crave. For, of the body's main features, an ass is the most vague in meaning and structurally flexible. What *is* an ass if not the world's best designed, most inviting blank space, on the one hand, and, on the other, a grungy peephole into humans' ordinariness, to put it mildly? (p. 100)

Roger's description of his predilections once again draws attention to the suburban environment of *Try*: a blank space that offers a retreat from the risks of having to express oneself but, at the same time, one that invites a penetrating scrutiny, a search for interior profundity. As with the opening of *Bedrooms have Windows*, this dichotomy of exterior blandness and a hidden interior suggests a re-inscription of the almost conventional suburban binary of outside conformity and interior deviancy. But, typical of New Narrative

fiction, Cooper's texts repeatedly move to neutralize or scramble these suburban opposites as he does the similarly structured bodily binary. In his earlier novel *Closer*, Cooper reveals mythically loaded aspects of the suburban environment to be vacuous. For example, an old mansion, long-dubbed 'the haunted house' by neighbourhood kids, is eventually discovered to be 'nothing, an empty thing'.[42] In *Try*, household interiors are either as bland as exteriors: compare the dull repetition that describes Ziggy's travails through suburban streets 'Ziggy glares out the side window [...] suburbia smeared to either side [...] House, house, house ... indistinguishably blurred' (pp. 136-7), with the doomed kid Robin being taken on a tour of Ziggy's uncle Ken's house; notwithstanding the fact that Ken has had part of it converted to a porno set, all Robin sees is 'Room, room, room ... room.' (p. 3) Otherwise the household interiors flicker between having the appearance of being inside and outside: in Ziggy's transvestite friend's home, 'the walls are beige, à la most of the rest of Cricket's parents' house, only shinier, as if wallpapered with autumn leaves, which ... he squints ... maybe it is.' (p. 162) Cooper's blending of interior and exterior is certainly facilitated by the very architecture which characterizes the south Californian single-family home, in particular that of the most affordable, most prolific unit, the tract house. Its airy, simple design had the effect of transforming interior space. As Robert Fishman contends, 'through simplification, the "small California House," as builders originally called it, had absorbed the main lessons of twentieth-century modernism: forms and structure are one; inside and outside merge; and space within is open.'[43]

At the corporeal level, the quest to glean the essence of a body's beauty, or the power that it holds over the observer, through an investigation of its interior, is always thwarted. In Cooper's *Frisk*, the visceral details of dismembered corpses reveal a bathetic absence of significance: 'we cut him apart for a few hours, and studied everything inside the body, not saying much to one another, just the occasional, Look at this, or swear word, until there was nothing around but a big, off-white shell in the middle of the worst mess in the world. God, human bodies are such garbage bags.'[44] In *Closer*, George Miles, who is the archetype for the beautiful, passive youths in the subsequent four novels,[45] becomes the object of fascination of older men, though their interior investigations reveal only banal truths, that

[42] Dennis Cooper, *Closer* (New York: Grove, 1989), pp. 8-9.
[43] Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic, 1987), pp. 176-7.
[44] Dennis Cooper, *Frisk* (New York: Grove, 1991), p. 106.
[45] *Frisk, Try, Guide* (New York: Grove, 1997) and *Period* (New York: Grove, 2000); in all, the five texts are referred to as 'The George Miles Cycle'. The themes, settings and characters in these novels are so similar to render further contextualization unnecessary.

George evidently eats junk food for instance,[46] or further mystification, e.g., 'George had filled up with hieroglyphs', making it impossible for his dissector to 'figure things out.'[47] In *Try*, Ziggy even offers resistance to the adults' desire for penetration as a means of understanding: like Roger, he seems to realize that the anus carries a strong signification; examining himself, he discovers his own to be like 'an insignia or braille' (again, a sign, but an unreadable one). Moreover, he reverses Roger's interpretation; for Ziggy, assholes stand for expulsion not invitation: 'if they *were* braille, they'd probably say, "Bye," he thinks, ha ha ha ha' (p. 19), which amounts to a scatological two fingers up at Roger's intellectualized (but still voracious) anality. However, Ziggy's reconfiguration of the signification of the anus does nothing to prevent his abuse by both his parents for much of the remainder of the novel, rather proving that semantic subversion provides insufficient offensive (or in this case, defensive) capabilities against a more powerful party.

Ultimately, few kinds of narrative in *Try* escape censure; those that avoid criticism appear rather to open up space than misrepresent experience. One such example is Ziggy's beloved band Hüsker Dü. Regarding a poster of the band members, Ziggy decides:

> Something about those three older guys' eyes, and the misery they housed, did this great corrective thing to the world. It seemed roomier or something. More ... uncharted. They knew a spot. Somewhere realistically bizarre, not just overly imagined on drugs then transcribed in corny outer-space colours, like in the posters that spaced out most kids he'd grown up with. (pp. 175-6)

Ziggy is himself ironically encumbered with a name that invokes one of the greatest icons of suburban escapism, Bowie's Ziggy Stardust. But as he says himself, Ziggy does not wish to leave for some Day-Glo fantasy realm (and neither, once again, is the teenager intrigued by the kind of metropolitan allure that Bowie's later, terrestrial incarnations radiated).[48] Rather, Ziggy seeks places and modes of expression that are authentic and meaningful; it is from the blank suburbs where the likes of Ziggy are able to follow their own projects.

Ziggy's ideal location does not, however, represent a kind of escapism, in the way that, say, Forster's 'Greenwood' certainly does. At the end of *Maurice*, the homosexual

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[46] Cooper, *Closer*, p. 89.

[47] Ibid., p. 105.

[48] Cooper insists that whilst the character of Ziggy was based on a real-life friend of the same name, he was well aware of the connotations that would inevitably result from deploying the moniker. 'I liked the problem of that, I liked the suggestion. I always like that; I like to complicate things.' Also 'it creates a formal relationship between his rock critic father and the heavy-metal-obsessed Robin.' From author's interview with Cooper.

characters' elopement into a hidden Arcadian idyll is unsatisfactory: the greenwood is an unrepresentable space, being outside society and modernity, 'a "Never-never Land" which can have no existence outside the language of the mind.'[49] For Cooper, the powers of transformation accorded to the likes of Hüsker Dü, as well as the blankness of suburbia, are valued precisely because they suggest a sense of the ineffable – or to use Ziggy's word, the 'uncharted', conferring liberation from prescribed ways of seeing. In any case, Cooper's suburban scenes are not merely theoretical; far from being 'outside society and modernity', they have come to be representative of both. Neither are they idealized, as his confrontations with his parents testify; nor do they exhibit an absence of social interaction or complexity. Indeed Cooper depicts subtleties of differences based on wealth, though it seems Ziggy's richer acquaintances are equally eager to conceal themselves in a suffusion of blandness. For example, touring Nicole's belongings, Ziggy notices most of her clothes 'seem too nondescript and conventionally trendy for someone so sharp. Still, Ziggy's used to how wealthy people surround themselves with stuff that's simplistic or dull on the eyes, ears, nose, etc [...] It's like, Hey world, I'm rich, leave me fucking alone!' (p. 51). It would be productive to contrast Ziggy and his domain with an example of an expression, by a gay writer, of the desire for suburban escape that is comparable to the juvenile escapism – the 'Never-never land' – of the Greenwood:

> Through the drone of mowers,
> between the cries of the girls jumping rope,
> under the rumble of his own skateboard
>
> the boy detected a whispering in the grass,
> and in the bed of tulips he hears
> a roaring like fire underground.
>
> Yet a still deeper silence pulls him
> in widening parabolas
> through the blue oak shade,
>
> makes him believe he can escape
> to the ocean floor, to outer space.[50]

Greg Hewitt's poem dreams of deliverance from the quotidian rhythms and spaces of

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[49] Anne Hartree, "'A passion that few English minds have admitted": Homosexuality and Englishness in E. M. Forster's *Maurice*', *Paragraph*, 19 (1996) 127-38 (p. 129).

[50] Greg Hewitt, 'Under the Sun', in *Red Suburb* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2002), p. 26.

suburbia, but the alternatives are just the distant realms half-conceived by a boyish imagination – the very type that Ziggy criticises of his less dynamic peers.

The Suburban Frontier

The bleakness and blankness of Cooper's Angelean suburbs, in particular, the sense of their expansive emptiness which derives from a seemingly relative under-population and absence of social cohesion, characterizes these environments as being in the early stages of their suburban development. As Yi-Fu Tuan has described, the rough beginnings of un-planned suburbs in the US commonly constitute a new frontier:

> The suburb is at the frontier of metropolitan expansion. It is a society coming into being, a society undergoing change, at the end of which is urban culture. Pioneering characteristics of the new suburbs are revealed in its lack of form, lack of socially differentiated structure, and in the general rawness of its living conditions: muddy streets, undependable water, primitive sewerage and garbage disposal, poor or non-existent schools, poor transportation and the sense of isolation. A pioneering sense of doing things oneself is necessary when a family moves into a low-income subdivision, created – almost overnight – in the countryside.[51]

Typically, Tuan argues, the developmental model of suburbs is equivalent to a process of urbanization. Gradually, they acquire many of the public, commercial and cultural amenities associated with the urban centre, though by which time it is likely that further new and more peripheral suburban developments have expanded beyond the urbanized suburb, with correspondingly baser living conditions. Ziggy's far-flung neighbourhood is manifestly of this early-stage suburban type, exhibiting some of the frontier roughness as suggested by Tuan: Roger casts a derisive eye over the 'scrubby, arid San Gabriel Valley, whose flat neighborhoods were inexpensive enough for my brainless, job-flitting, assholish ex-boyfriend', whose property amounts to 'a brief, pothole-dotted driveway [which] led to a standard garage [next to a] nondescript, fifties-style tract house' (p. 101). It is actually not altogether clear how new this suburb is: 'fifties-*style*' suggests yet another pseudo-historic architectural motif to add the already thoroughly post-modern mix that is Angelean suburbia (which offers a 'choice of nuevo-kitsch' styles, e.g. 'Tudor, Château, Camelot, Miami Vice'[52]). 'Fifties-style', however, amounts to a peculiarly self-reflexive one (a tract

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[51] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 238.

[52] In James Robert Baker, *Tim and Pete* (Manchester: Ringpull, 1995 [1993]), p. 174.

house in the style of a tract house?). The 'huge' tree in Brice's garden, though, suggests that the 'style' was a slip of the pen on Cooper's part and that Brice's neighbourhood is in fact several decades old. One of the things characteristic of 'fresh' suburbs, Tuan notes, are the doomed, 'straggly' saplings that die off through neglect or vandalism.[53] Though if it is the case that Ziggy's home environment was built in the fifties, it seems that, contrarily, the only thing that has developed is that single tree; the increased urbanity predicted by Tuan has entirely passed the neighbourhood by. The potholes, then, might as well have been a result of an absence of development, rather than, what is likely to have been the case, a lack of maintenance. Also, the very form of the most basic suburban structure, the tract house, contributes to the impression of living in a frontier-like environment. The simple and spacious open-planned interiors of the tract house, and the low lines of its roofs, evoke the isolation of the original ranch houses of the Western landscape. And, through its repetition across subdivision after subdivision, the tract house produces wide horizons, contributing to a sense of expansiveness.

That the suburban environment of *Try* still feels frontier-like forty years on is significant. The newly-built suburb requires initiative and fosters autonomy or, to use Tuan's words again, 'a pioneering sense of doing things oneself is necessary'. Indeed, new suburbs had this attraction in their favour: they offered freedom from many of the restrictions of urban living. Critical of the supercilious denigration of the enhancements made by many of the new suburbanites to their properties, Tuan insists 'to the residents themselves the changes were not tacky; rather they expressed that freedom to innovate which was denied them in the city'.[54] For Ziggy, this 'freedom to innovate' is of paramount importance. A second-generation teenaged suburbanite, Ziggy's interests lie naturally not with conservatory extensions and amateur topiary, but to things closer to his own experience. His projects are concerned with sexual and artistic exploration, for example, his zine, 'I Apologize', dedicated to the sexually abused and, once again, his apprehensive fascination with sex with other men. To be clear, all of Ziggy's creative exploits are suburb-located: his zine production is a home- and school-based industry, and all of his sexual adventures take place within his own and his friends' parental houses. Escape to the city and the supposed freedoms that dance on the metropolitan horizon have no caché for the teenager; the imagined expansiveness of the suburb-as-frontier goes a long way to

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[53] Tuan, *Topophilia*, p. 234.
[54] Ibid., p. 235.

counter the restrictions of Ziggy's family relationships. This frontier is largely featureless, itself extending into nothingness or, like the city grid that Roger imagines from high above, replicates emptiness into infinitude. Both the vastness and the void-ness of the suburban frontier allow the likes of Ziggy to imagine and even to enact infinite performances and transformations. However, it is very much to the point that these altered states are not pinned down by the text: description equates with prescription; if Cooper were to outline Ziggy's potentialities it would be to delimit them. As Calhoun suggests, 'Things don't have to be cordoned off in pockets, drawers, towns, neighbourhoods, etc., to function. There's the possibility of genius in chaos, in having to fumble around, knowing whatever you need isn't all that well hidden a half-foot in any direction.' (p. 66) Calhoun comes to this realization whilst rummaging for injecting equipment; much of his theorizing appears to have become addled and self-centred through his addiction. Nevertheless, he has recapitulated the narrative's conviction in existence in unbounded space, an existence which is at the same time always undisclosed and imperceptible.

Cooper also uses a number of textual devices to ensure that Ziggy's transformations stay extra-textual. For example, the novel's narrative is fractured, staying with each character for only brief periods; its narrative voice continually speaks in Ziggy's ever-cautious demotic. The vacillations and hedges such as 'like', 'or whatever' and 'whatchacallit' (e.g. pp. 142-3) all serve the purpose of leaving Ziggy's environment and psychological state uncertain, undetermined, whilst remaining faithful to his youthful perspective. Cooper has declared his discomfort with public readings of his own novels – 'When you read it aloud, you have to make [the characters] people and put emotion in their voices. I always feel that's kind of false. It's fake.'[55] Such an enactment of the characters in this way is seen as being at once inauthentic, through the fakery of performance, and

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[55] Alexander Lawrence, 'Interview with Dennis Cooper', *Alt-X*, 1995, http://www.altx.com/int2/dennis.cooper.html [accessed 10 May 2005]. Cooper declares: 'the books are written to be read [alone], and reading them aloud is like an advertisement for them. The only way my work works is with a certain kind of deep insinuation. [...] I'm very interested in the idea that the reader is constructing the characters and the world and everything in their head – and again this is an anarchist thing – there's a kind of power balance that's very important to me, and it's about creating certain kinds of paradigms, and also for the reader to take responsibility as well. I see this more deeply private relationship than between the reader and the text; it's a way of creating a seduction. A book is the only art form that's entirely private. If you listen to a song it's in the air, and other people hear it. [...] When you read the book there's nothing there; it's just material and then it only exists in your head. I'm always working with that. [...] You have to be really careful with description. It's more interested in creating a trigger, or about creating triggers, something that would make the drug work. I've always tried to be really cautious about that. I don't want there to be a way to escape. I think if you put too much description in it, it gives the reader an opportunity to reject the text.' From author's interview with Cooper.

circumscriptive, through the act of 'making people'. Presumably Cooper finds the interpretation (of characters, for example) necessary in any public reading of his work as militating against his text's autonomy.

However, teenagers are not the only figures to colonize the frontier landscape of *Try*. As suggested above, Brice not only casts a brutal shadow over Ziggy's home life, but also has literally reconfigured his suburban home *as* a frontier realm, in the style of the Old West. Brice's version of the suburban frontier has in common with Ziggy's a desire to open up a space that enables autonomy, though Brice envisages a lawless moral vacuum which benefits only himself which results in Ziggy's freedoms violently curtailed. Once again then, Cooper's suburbia is recast as contested space, with conflicting visions of the suburban environment across generations constituting the basis for antagonism and physical violence.

The suburban disappearing act of several of Cooper's characters is for some an unpalatable proposition. For it entails the abandonment of the dynamic yet supportive communities and sexual cultures of the urban centres. The writer Bruce Benderson, for instance, bemoans the absorption of his urban constituency, the territory of assorted queers, sex workers and drug addicts, by a safe, fatuous suburbanity:

> As I wallow in my waning degenerate center-city paradise, I reflect on the ways that the terrain of the Other is shrinking in America. To me, suburban America seems omnipresent. [...] Sentimental nonauthenticity [sic], which is the genius of suburbia, has taken the lead in Times Square. It is epitomized by the new establishments' use of vacuum-molded plastic and steel facsimiles or art deco trim, which serves as a cynical tip of the hat to Times Square's architectural past. What used to be sordid is being replaced by pseudo.[56]

Benderson refers here to the effects of new zoning laws introduced in 1996 which prohibited sex-related businesses from the area and enabled the development of large-scale commercial establishments. The close involvement of Disney with Times Square's gentrification (along with a sizeable amount of its own money the corporation was lent millions of dollars by the city and state to 'renovate' the area) has in particular fueled criticism that the area has been converted into a sanitized urban theme park.[57] Aaron Betsky

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[56] Bruce Benderson, 'Losing Times Square', *artnet*, 2004, http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/features/benderson/benderson9-9-96.asp [accessed 12 September 2005].

[57] See M. Christine Boyer, 'Twice-Told Stories: The Double Erasure of Times Square', in *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space*, ed. Iain Borden, Joe Kerr, Jane Rendell and Alicia Pivaro

envisages a process that is similar to the one observed in horror by Bruce Benderson but one which follows an opposite course: rather than urban cultures being swamped by suburban encroachment, Betsky sees queers evacuating the city centres for the suburbs:

> Queer space is, in fact, in danger of disappearing. AIDS destroyed the queer community as a coherent structure, and queers disappeared into their homes, the suburbs, and anonymity. [...] Now queers often want to be normal. They adopt children, dress like their neighbors, and even disavow the presence of a communal culture.[58]

Betsky's comments sound rather familiar after examining *Try*: individuals disappearing into anonymity; the adoption of children by gay parents; dressing like ones neighbours; plus of course an author who has repeatedly disavowed 'the presence of a communal culture.' These tactics, however, aim to achieve precisely the opposite of normalcy – anarchistic autonomy. Betsky is at least aware that fellow queers have reckoned with and created visions of suburban environments.

But Betsky's synopsis that 'to queer authors like Dennis Cooper [the desire for underage boys] laid bare the rootlessness and moral boundlessness of suburbia in an extremely violent and spatial manner' is evidently only partially correct.[59] Cooper amply demonstrates the 'boundlessness', moral and otherwise, of suburbia, but there is a misplaced negativity in Betsky's assertion, which no doubt derives from the emphasis on the borderline paedophilia of Cooper's novels – which, in any case, is by no means the only aspect that reveals the dissipation of his suburbs. Yet Betsky describes the emergence of a new kind of non-physical space, imposed on queers after the mass-destruction inflicted by AIDS: 'the void', an emptiness characterized by 'that absence, that loss.'[60] Through a collective experience of this absence, the void has become 'the queerest space of all'; subsequently, queers have learnt how to 'build an identity that would then be separate from real spaces of connection and community', most notably, Betsky states, through the Internet.[61] Whilst AIDS is hardly on the radar in any of Cooper's books, hence not the motor for suburbanization that it is for Betsky, it does seem strange that Betsky cannot

(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 30-53. Samuel R. Delaney makes a similar case to Benderson's in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

[58] Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow, 1997), p. 192.

[59] Ibid., p. 192.

[60] Ibid., p. 182.

[61] Ibid., p. 179.

conceptually unite the emptiness and boundlessness of the void with that of suburbia. Indeed, by his own account, the two domains are synonymous: it is surely only the resilience of the hostile and narrow discourse on suburbia that prevents one from seeing that suburbia may possibly be 'the queerest space of all'.

Kevin Killian asserts that if the writing and literary milieus of modernism are characteristically urban, postmodernism 'is a suburban mode'.[62] New Narrative has frequently located in the suburbs a decentredness and open-endedness that resist the teleological imperatives of modernist, or, indeed, conventional gay writing. Yet, as the examination of coming-out stories in chapter one has shown, gay narratives that are considered conventional also frequently demonstrate surprising, even paradoxical, properties, with some counteracting their own city-bound momentum with an appreciation of ways suburban existence both generates and complicates gay identity. Despite their very different aesthetics, New Narrative fiction and coming-out stories arguably have similar reasons for considering suburban environments, and even render them in similar ways. For example, Cooper's *Try* and McCann's *Mother of Sorrows* – both set in suburban landscapes of the 1950s – capture a comparable sense of the suburbs' empty transparency. Whilst the two texts do make clear the impositions made by those with more power, this somewhat abstract quality also foregrounds and enables the protagonists' mutability. In short, whilst suburbs in various gay texts may not be places of pleasure, they are sites of possibility; narrating suburbia serves to broaden the horizons of homosexual experience.

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[62] Killian, in correspondence with author.

Part II

'I'm Not Thinking of My Mother Now': Revisiting the Suburbs in Adulthood

Chapter Four
The Importance of Being Normal: 'Right Flight' and the Fiction of Suburban Resettlement

> [David Goodstein:] 'I'm convinced that 85 percent of the gays in the United States lead very private lives, don't care about the gay scene and go to bars no more than four times a year. They're just like other suburban couples. *The Advocate* is for middle-class readers – radicals don't read, they don't have the time.' [Edmund White:] I pictured all those suburbanites thumbing through the ads for hustlers, lounging over the classifieds rather than the comics on a long Sunday afternoon in Peoria. The fantasy of gay liberals (as opposed to the radicals) is that homosexuals are basically the same as everyone else.[1]

If the trajectory of suburbs to city examined in the previous three chapters is associated with gay youth, its reversal, the retreat from the city back to the suburbs, narrates a particular story of gay adulthood. This chapter investigates the return to the suburbs from the perspective of 'conservative' gay critics and writers based in the United States from the early 1990s onwards. These contributors espouse 'assimilation' in order to minimize homophobia: gay people must live like the majority of Americans in order to be accepted by them. According to Paul Robinson's analysis of this new conservative force, gays must present a conformist image of themselves along three axes: politics, gender and sexuality. They must abandon, respectively, radical leftist or alliance politics, effeminacy (or, generally, gender non-conformity) and promiscuity (along with 'extreme' forms of sexual behaviour).[2] Each of these apparently unpalatable attributes are inextricably associated with the 'subculture' gays of the urban centres; a conventional middle-class suburban lifestyle will, many of these conservatives argue or unconsciously presume, help gays be disassociated from and to be weaned off all three.

Several conservative commentators call for interventions which celebrate the ordinariness of 'mainstream' gay life. The predominantly suburb-located fiction of American writer David Leavitt is most frequently mobilized in this respect. I will show, however, that a number of these suburban texts complicate or resist their deployment by the gay right. In particular, there is a tendency for the protagonists of these narratives to be lulled by the suburbs, and, in particular, by memories of their own upbringing that suburban

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[1] David Goodstein, the editor of *The Advocate*, in conversation with Edmund White. Edmund White, *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* (London: Picador, 1986 [1980]), p. 39.

[2] Paul Robinson, *Queer Wars: The New Gay Right and its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 2.

living always seems to evoke. These childhood associations precipitate a form of infantilization that contradicts attempts to posit suburban life as a mature alternative to an allegedly juvenile urban subculture.

American Gay Conservatives: A Broad Suburb

The emergent 'gay right' owes little to the gay wings of established conservative political parties (the Log Cabin Republicans in the States; the Gay Conservatives – formally Torche, or the Tory Campaign for Homosexual Equality – in Britain). The profile and influence of these groups is quite limited in comparison to a handful of individual commentators characterized – often controversially – as gay and lesbian conservatives, such as Andrew Sullivan, Bruce Bawer, Nora Vincent and Michelangelo Signorile. The majority of these men and women have backgrounds in (mostly East Coast-based) journalism,[3] and several have published what have been described as assimilationist manifestoes in book form, most notably Bawer's *A Place at the Table* in 1993, Sullivan's *Virtually Normal* in 1995, and Signorile's *Life Outside* in 1997. Despite some similarities in outlook between party-political gays and the above roll-call of writers, the latter have undoubtedly reached a much wider audience than their card-carrying counterparts. Certainly, Sullivan et al. see their remit as much more than influencing Republican Party policy (and in the States the Log Cabin Republicans have seen what little influence they had dwindle further as a consequence of the rise of the religious right; in the 2004 Presidential election they even withdrew their support for George W. Bush to protest their marginalization[4]). In any case, not all of the writers mentioned are paid-up members of the Republican Party, and several are unhappy at being described as conservative. Bawer is particularly weary of the appellation 'gay conservative', insisting on his website that 'I have always considered myself a centrist or classical liberal and have always been a registered Democrat'.[5] Signorile rejects the ascription emphatically – he sees himself as a leftist – reserving it for the likes of Sullivan; indeed, the two men share a mutual personal and political animosity that has reverberated for much of their professional lives. Certainly Signorile is no friend of

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[3] Sullivan was editor of *The New Republic* between 1991 and 1996 before writing for the *New York Times*; Bawer was a film critic for the *American Spectator* in the 1980s, later becoming a columnist for *The Advocate*. Vincent is a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*. Signorile wrote for *Outweek*, a short-lived but controversial gay New York weekly at the centre of the 'outing' controversies in the early 1990s. Signorile continues to write for *The Advocate* and he and Sullivan contribute regularly to www.salon.com.

[4] See Michelangelo Signorile, 'Log Cabin's Drug Money', in *Hitting Hard* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2005), pp. 295-9.

[5] Bruce Bawer, 'Who am I?', no date, http://www.brucebawer.com/biog.htm [accessed 1 October 2005].

the Republican Party, and most of his energies have been channeled into exposing what he sees as the 'sexual hypocrisy' of the right, either by 'outing' secretly gay party members who have supported homophobic policies or, more recently, targeting openly gay and lesbian figures who remain silent about their party's intolerance (notably Mary Cheney, the daughter of the current Vice-President[6]). Of all the writers named, Sullivan is evidently the most comfortable with being described as a conservative. Aside from sexual politics, he is an energetic proponent of a number of rightwing economic and social causes, and has been a vigorous defender of American action in the Iraq War. (He has, however, been consistently critical of the Bush government's environmental policies.)

Given the diversity of the political self-portraits painted by the above named writers, it would be wise to use 'gay conservative' with considerable caution. I concur with Paul Robinson by acknowledging that it must be used 'in a capacious and perhaps excessively elastic sense.'[7] Nevertheless, the term can be a useful one, revealing similarities that are often hidden behind antagonistic rhetoric. Moreover, the label underlines strong and unsettling connections between the arguments of the gay right and homophobic conservative discourse. For example, Bawer declares 'I am a member of what must be called – much as I hate to borrow a phrase from our thirty-seventh President – the "silent majority" of homosexuals.'[8] The reticence at redeploying such a term is unsurprising: 'silent majority' after all is a concept that lies near the heart of Republican moral conservatism and is often used to characterize a core of the American public ill-disposed to any advance in the cause of gay rights. What unites Bawer, Sullivan and Signorile, then, is much less their party affiliation than a belief that gays should adopt a conformist lifestyle. Or, rather, each claims that an overwhelming majority of gays prefer and in fact already do live a conventional, quiet (read: suburban) kind of life: it is just that the brash hedonism of the metropolitan minority continually obscures this important truth. A few brief quotations from each writer illustrate just how convergent their views are. Bawer asserts:

> [For most homosexuals,] living in the gay ghetto is not a desirable option. Like most adult heterosexuals, most adult homosexuals simply don't want such a life. They

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[6] Signorile published an open letter to Mary Cheney in the *New York Press*, 3 February 2004 (reprinted as 'Dear Mary', in Signorile, *Hitting Hard*, pp. 247-51). According to Signorile, the letter prompted thousands of supportive emails from around the world, and a website, www.DearMary.com, inviting individuals to write their own letters to Cheney.

[7] Robinson, *Queer Wars*, p. 2.

[8] Bruce Bawer, *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* (New York: Poseidon, 1993), p. 26.

were raised in conventional middle-class homes in conventional middle-class neighborhoods, and they don't see why being gay should prevent them from doing so.[9]

Similarly, Bawer insists:

The huge majority of [gays] don't want to be defiant, promiscuous East Village radicals; they don't want to teach the world how to have better sex. They just want to be able to love in the way that comes naturally to them, in places where they feel at home.[10]

Sullivan claims:

At times, it seems San Francisco is almost frozen in time – roughly 1977. Gay life in the rest of the U.S. is increasingly suburban, mainstream, assimilable. Here in the belly of the beast, Village People look-alikes predominate, and sex is still central to the culture.[11]

And from Signorile:

Gay life, in the urban areas as well as in the suburbs, small towns and beyond, has been the subject of much media attention, showing straight as well as gay America that gay people can and do live a vast array of 'lifestyles' and not one particular 'gay lifestyle' that, as the stereotype has pegged gay men specifically, centers around sex and hedonism.[12]

Bawer, Sullivan and Signorile all invoke a city-suburb dichotomy to differentiate between two kinds of gay person: the promiscuous radical versus the monogamous stay-at-home. The latter type is in the majority, or otherwise represents an expanding demographic: the suburbanite reflects the way gay life is changing; the ghetto is increasingly something of an outmoded throwback. Suburban gays are better able to cope with living in straight society and are correspondingly well-positioned to challenge misconceptions that derive from the supposedly singular urban 'gay lifestyle'.

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[9] Ibid., p. 35.
[10] Ibid., p. 179.
[11] Andrew Sullivan, 'The Daily Dish', April 16 2001, http://www.andrewsullivan.com/index.php?dish_inc=archives/2001_04_15_dish_archive.html [accessed 1 October 2005].
[12] Michelangelo Signorile, *Life Outside: The Signorile Report on Gay Men: Sex, Drugs, Muscles, and the Passages of Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. xvii.

Once again, there are definite differences between Sullivan's and Bawer's assumptions and arguments on the one hand and Signorile's on the other. The most obvious distinction concerns their politics, or at least, their political rhetoric. For instance, the figure of the gay 'radical' is not for Signorile the bogey that it is for Bawer. Signorile's history of activism includes frontline participation in groups such as ACT UP which favoured the confrontational methods of direct action or 'zapping'. Not only is Signorile unapologetic about these activities – except perhaps for his tendency to indulge in what he retrospectively judges to be 'tantrum politics'[13] – he is generous when considering the variety of political affiliations of gays both inside and outside the large cities. By contrast, so allergic is Bawer to any suggestion of radicalism that he balks at Signorile's books before even opening them – because the author is pictured on their covers wearing a black T-shirt, an image he contends is calculated to 'bolster [...] the image of gay-as-radical.'[14]

However, in quite the same manner as Bawer, Signorile is deeply hostile to what he considers an urban cult of promiscuity, and champions instead the monogamy that is said to be increasingly the norm amongst suburban, small-town and rural gays. Conscious of the negative associations carried by monogamy, a term that 'carr[ies] the weight of heterosexual orthodoxy',[15] Signorile often clads the word with scare quotes. He prefers to talk of 'postmodern monogamy', in order to further distinguish the sexual and social practices of gays from straights, though really the term refers to strictly monogamous relationships along with those that attempt or perform monogamy. There may well be good reasons to criticize certain sexual attitudes or habits, particularly in the wake of the AIDS crisis; Signorile is especially scathing about the rise of 'bearbacking' (unprotected anal intercourse between gay men). Nevertheless, according to Paul Robinson, Signorile's demonization of urban promiscuity separates him from the tradition of gay liberation thinking and marks him out as a '*sexual* conservative'.[16]

Yet, unlike Sullivan and Bawer, Signorile acknowledges – indeed, is enthusiastic about – the burgeoning diversity of gay urban centres in the United States. In the largest cities, gays have developed a broad array of sexual, recreational, artistic and religious subcultures. Ultimately, however, Signorile sees groups such as The Metropolitan Community Church,

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[13] Signorile 'admits to being embarrassed now by the violence of his attacks [on closeted individuals in positions of power and influence], which were distinguished by their tendency to break out into capital letters – the typographical equivalent of a scream.' Robinson, *Queer Wars*, pp. 106-7.
[14] Bawer, *A Place at the Table*, p. 163.
[15] Signorile, *Life Outside*, p. xxxii.
[16] Robinson, *Queer Wars*, p. 103.

gay kite fliers and 'bear' culture (a gay subculture largely comprised of older, larger and more hirsute men) as having emerged 'in opposition', as acting 'as a resistance to the scene', which is, as ever, dominated by body image and the pursuit of sex.[17] Signorile's insistent binarism, however, diminishes the significance of the pluralization of gay urban subculture: the existence of these various groups always serves to show the continued dominance of the gay 'scene'.

More productively, Signorile offers a more detailed picture than either Sullivan or Bawer, not only of the kinds of suburban environments in which gays are increasingly likely to be found, but also the motivations for their relocation as well as the effects of in-migrations of gays on those places. Citing the findings of the Midwestern geographer Jerry Kramer, Signorile contends that the places that gays are most likely to seek to inhabit are historic 'inner-ring' suburbs which, importantly, have reputations for tolerance.[18] If, as Kramer contends, it is true that the absence of homophobia is a pre-requisite for extensive gay suburban habitation – and there seems to be no reason why this would not be the case – then Sullivan and Bawer would appear to have confused cause and effect. It is not the existence of good gay neighbours that promotes tolerance of homosexuality; rather, a neighbourhood with a history of accepting religious and racial diversity will encourage gays to set up residence. Thus, the experience of many gays shows that social change might well be better encouraged not by assimilation, but by the acceptance and appreciation of difference.

Arguably, though, the demographic shift from urban centres to particular suburbs simply amounts to a re-agglomeration of gay people. For instance, Royal Oak outside Detroit, with its gay and lesbian bookstores, bars and clubs 'is for all practical purposes a ghetto in the suburbs'. However, the 'suburban ghetto' is in fact really neither of these things; indeed, each has helped transform the other. One interviewee declares 'the families and their station wagons are all around you – but sometimes they're lesbian moms or gay dads.'[19] Signorile enthuses that 'the mix provides for an interesting, new kind of suburbia that will no doubt punctuate the twenty-first century, where shopping mall culture meets the leather lifestyle.'[20] This optimism is inspired by, once again, a particular kind of suburb, but

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[17] Signorile, *Life Outside*, p. 178.
[18] Ibid., pp. 194-5.
[19] Ibid., p. 198.
[20] Ibid., p. 199.

perhaps Signorile is right to suggest that entrenched ideas of the suburbs can be overhauled by surprising local developments.

Gay Assimilationism and British Contexts

The rise of a vocal gay right is an almost entirely American phenomenon. There are few British-based gay commentators of any repute in the mould of Sullivan or Bawer, that is, writers who argue consistently for a gay conformist agenda. Sullivan was born and raised in England, but the political engagement of his books, journalism, and more recently his web log, one of the most frequently visited of all on the World Wide Web, is thoroughly American in orientation.[21] Perhaps only Johann Hari, currently a columnist for the *Independent* newspaper, articulates the arguments of the American gay right with any regularity; unsurprisingly, Hari is an avowed admirer of Sullivan's work.[22] Hari would likely balk at being referred to as a conservative (he describes himself as a 'progressive'[23]). His insistence, however, upon gays presenting themselves as ordinary, even boring, as the only strategy of winning heterosexual approval and thereby homosexual equality, places his arguments squarely within the framework outlined by the American gay right. Hari claims, for instance: 'Once straight people know us as human beings, they are less likely to hate us';[24] 'we need to show how assimilated we are: how it's ridiculous to discriminate against us since we're no different from anyone else.'[25] Echoing Bawer, Hari argues that a tiny but belligerent fringe of gay activists (he calls them 'anti-assimilationists') are holding up the progress of gay equality against the better instincts of a presumed 'silent majority'. Also like Bawer, Hari is by turns embarrassed, anxious and derisive about urban gay subculture, particularly Pride marches. Similarly again, Hari would gladly like to see an end to effeminacy and camp, because both make it harder for masculine gay men to understand their sexuality and inaccurately stereotype the discrete (i.e. 'straight-acting') majority.[26]

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[21] http://www.andrewsullivan.com. Sullivan does write a regular column for *The* (London) *Times*, although this too primarily focuses on American culture and politics.

[22] See Johann Hari, '*Attack Queers* by Richard Goldstein: A Review', 6 October 2002, http://www.johannhari.com/archive/article.php?id=260 [accessed 21 September 2005].

[23] Johann Hari, 'The Strange, Unexplored Overlap Between Homosexuality and Fascism', *Attitude*, 24 June 2004, http://www.johannhari.com/archive/article.php?id=407 [accessed 21 September 2005].

[24] Johann Hari, 'The Harvey Milk School - and Why Gay Separatism Will Be a Disaster', *Attitude*, 20 February 2004, http://www.johannhari.com/archive/article.php?id=352 [accessed 21 September 2005].

[25] Johann Hari, '"Seeing Queerly" – Why I Am an Assimilationist', *Varsity*, 25 January 2001, http://www.johannhari.com/archive/article.php?id=232 [accessed 21 September 2005].

[26] Johann Hari, 'Why I Hate Queer Eye for the Straight Guy', *Independent*, 28 May 2004, http://www.johannhari.com/archive/article.php?id=407 [accessed 21 September 2005].

There are three main reasons why the arguments of the American gay right have much less traction in the United Kingdom. As well as providing a more nuanced account of the gay right, to underline the distinctiveness of national contexts also has the useful function of foregrounding the gay right's development, and also some of the tensions it suffers. The first difference is that, contrary to Hari's suggestion of a continued fractiousness, the relationship between leftist and moderate gay activists in Britain is generally accommodating. A comparison between the websites of the direct action group OutRage! and the notably more circumspect lobbying organisation Stonewall shows many overlapping concerns, for instance, on tackling homophobic bullying. Furthermore, OutRage! insists that whilst using different means, the two groups share the same goals: 'We certainly do not oppose Stonewall or, for that matter, any other group working towards LGBT equality. They have their methods and we have ours.'[27] Such comments suggest a tacit understanding that it may well take a combination of different strategies by the wider LGBT movement – ones which variously target streets, the corridors of power and the media – to better achieve gay equality. With moderates and radicals not only sharing considerable common ground, but believing that their differences are ultimately complimentary, there is much less opportunity for a new gay right to characterize activists as out of touch, as a minority voice.

Secondly, unlike in the United States, a home-grown religious right has limited influence in British political and cultural life. The relative prominence in the United Kingdom of Christian groups in the media in the 1970s and 1980s, such as The National Viewers and Listeners' Association, led by the seemingly indefatigable Mary Whitehouse, has given way to sporadic and usually unsuccessful interventions on the part of tiny militant organisations (for example, the noisy but failed attempt to prevent the BBC's screening of *Jerry Springer The Opera* by the group Christian Voice in January 2005). Certainly, the anti-secular 'culture wars' waged by the religious right since the beginning of the Clinton era are virtually unthinkable on such a scale in Britain. So too is the degree of leverage right-wing Christian groups appear to have on the current Republican administration. Generally, the absence of a powerful religious right in Britain has helped precipitate a less homophobic political climate. Indeed, entering the words 'gay conservative' into a UK archive or website yields more in the way of senior Conservatives

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[27] (No title), http://www.outrage.org.uk/faq.asp [accessed 21 September 2005].

pushing their party towards being more accepting of non-traditional relationships than British gays arguing that members of sexual minorities should be conservative in appearance and behaviour.

In the United States, by contrast, the vociferous homophobia of the religious right has had the effect of drawing the fire of gay activists. In a debate frequently derided as combative and shrill, not to mention irresolvable, the gay right have been more able to situate their line of argument as moderate and sensible. This kind of rhetorical manoeuvre is often used by conservatives to justify reactionary measures, particularly in the area of 'moral issues' and civil rights reform. One of the most notable instances of such tactics in Britain occurred in the late 1980s during the debating of what became known as Section 28. Prohibiting the 'promotion' of homosexuality and 'the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' by local authorities, Section 28's path to the statute books was paved by certain Conservative MPs positioning the 'legitimate' concerns of parents about sex education between two extremes. Supporters of Section 28 distanced themselves from the mindless homophobia of another era while castigating in the same speech the ill-conceived enthusiasm and support for non-standard families of certain, usually inner-city, Labour-run councils (which quickly became synonymous with the 'loony left', a term coined and popularised by the right-wing press).

Perhaps the comparison between justifications for this vindictive piece of legislation (repealed in 2000) and the conservatism of Bawer and company is harsh. After all, the only kind of activism many of these writers are able to justify is the legalistic variety, which includes the lobbying for the removal of just such discriminatory laws. Indeed, these legal battles, they say, are the one reason for the contemporary gay movement's existence; Sullivan insists that after they have all been won, the movement should simply 'pack up'.[28] Such claims about gay activism's necessary narrowness are, however, insincere. The restricting of gay politics to a respectable reformist avenue is almost always combined with a cultural project which attempts to promote the image of the 'good homosexual'. To deny that the self-surveillance inherent in the projection of positive images is indeed a political strategy serves only to show the extent to which the discourse of homophobic legislators has become increasingly naturalized within gay subcultural debate. It is likely that there

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[28] 'When we get the right for same-sex marriage, we have done all we need to do, we can just pack the movement up and close it down.' Quoted by Michael Bronski, 'Why Do Gays Want to Say "I Do"?', Z Magazine, October 2003, http://zmagsite.zmag.org/Oct2003/bronski1003.html [accessed 2 April 2006].

have long been assimilationist tendencies in gay culture, but as Anna Marie Smith suggests, when 'the good homosexual/dangerous queer differentiation [...] is articulated at the level of official discourse, the already mobilized exclusions from within the communities can be accelerated even further, contributing to the further marginalization of those who do not fit the image of the "good citizens next door"'.[29] The identical pillorying, by the gay right and by supporters of Section 28, of leftwing activists as urban, noisy and foolish, combined with the championing of a conservative middle-class 'silent majority', serves only to confirm Smith's concerns. It is probably no wonder then that many on the gay right object to being called 'conservative': the political label carries associations that are just a little too close for comfort.

Another line of argument voiced by gay conservatives that is similarly rearticulated by the homophobic right to stall the advance of legal reform concerns the economic status of gays. It is often asserted that the alleged greater personal wealth enjoyed by gays which largely comes from being free of the financial costs of child-rearing means that they are more likely to vote for a party with fiscally right-wing policies (so long as that party is sufficiently tolerant of homosexuality). Aside from the fact that numerous studies have shown the relative wealth of gays and (particularly) lesbians has been significantly overstated (e.g., M. V. Lee Badgett finds that on average that gay and lesbian people are poorer than heterosexuals[30]), popularizing the notion of gay wealth (in Britain, the idea of the 'pink pound') has predictable political drawbacks. Many on the homophobic right have used the apparent affluence of gays to argue that homosexuals are actually a privileged group. Further legal reform is, they argue, therefore unnecessary; the gay civil rights agenda merely amounts to special pleading.

The third reason for the gay right having gained much more ground in the States than in Britain derives from the differing impact of AIDS on the countries' respective gay subcultures. According to Alan Sinfield, whilst it often seemed that the British were sharing the American experience of the epidemic, another consequence of the fact that 'a good deal of European gay identity derives from the United States', actually, AIDS caused much

[29] Anna Marie Smith, New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 20.
[30] M. V. Lee Badgett, 'Beyond Biased Samples: Challenging the Myths on the Economic Status of Lesbians and Gay Men', in Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life, ed. Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 65-72.

more devastation in North American cities than in European ones.[31] Several commentators have noted the political implications that AIDS has had for American gay subculture. Some, like Aaron Betsky, discussed at the end of chapter three, have suggested that the response of becoming much more sexually circumspect in the face of AIDS has de-radicalized gay men: their retreat from queer urban subcultural environments has been driven by a desire to live a safe, conformist life. Actually, a fairer analysis would be that reactions were polarized: if some did indeed flee the city for quiet suburban isolation, countless others remained behind, organizing themselves to better care for AIDS sufferers and to confront negligent or hostile authorities (James Robert Baker's *Tim and Pete*, discussed in chapter five, is a fictional text that examines both subcultural responses). Many have argued, rarely without controversy, that gay men's anxieties over their sexual behaviour have noticeably relaxed in recent years. In his extremely controversial essay 'When Plagues End', Sullivan reasoned that new combination drug therapies have demoted HIV's status from death sentence to liveable illness.[32] However, despite the alleged return to past sexual practices, one claimed consequence of the epidemic is that it has drawn sympathy from heterosexual society (after initial ignorance, fear and hostility), which has had a further moderating influence on gays. Robinson states: 'the catastrophe generated an unexpected outpouring from straights, and the heroic response of the gay community won it a degree of admiration that contributed significantly to its incorporation into the American mainstream [...] and one of the prime effects of this integration has been to wean them off oppositional politics.'[33] But if Robinson's is indeed an accurate picture of the relationship between gay subculture and straight society in the United States, at least in the early to mid-1990s, then the gay right's desire for homosexual assimilation is effectively a fait accompli, its accomplishment having little or nothing to do with how conformist gays have been behaving, and everything to do with how much they have been suffering.[34] Indeed, some of

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[31] Once again, Sinfield suggests that the reason for these differences derives partly from Britain's geography: being a smaller place, fewer gay and lesbian people move to urban centres than in the United States; consequently subcultural networks are 'thinner', with transmission correspondingly lower. Also, 'initial transmission of HIV was slower and later because Britons had not developed, or been allowed to have, bath-houses and back-rooms, so knowledge about safer sex arrived in time to hinder the rate of infection.' Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), pp. 90-91.

[32] Andrew Sullivan, 'When Plagues End', in *Love Undetectable: Reflections on Friendship, Sex and Survival* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998 [originally published in *New York Times Magazine*, 11 November 1996]), pp. 3-88.

[33] Robinson, *Queer Wars*, p. 6.

[34] The sheer presence of the multiple Oscar-winning film *Philadelphia* (dir. Jonathan Demme, TriStar, 1993) suggests that Robinson's description probably is accurate: the straight Hollywood star Tom Hanks takes the

Leavitt's suburban fiction, particularly his novel *Equal Affections* (1989), which I examine below, has been argued as being less an articulation of a gay conservative manifesto than it is a troubled response to the AIDS crisis that ravaged urban gay cultures across the US.

Limitations of the Assimilationist Argument

The assimilationist approach to gay politics, as Hari would have it, is open to numerous and serious criticisms.[35] The first is the presumption of a 'silent majority'. No attempt is ever made to prove the suburbanity, the ordinariness or the conservative instincts of the greater number of gays through, for example, sustained sociological or psephological analysis. Robinson complains, for instance, that Signorile's *Life Outside* purports to be a 'sociological observation', yet 'Signorile's "method" is random in the extreme', his sample 'both small and uncontrolled'.[36] (Signorile's book is nevertheless still considerably more extensively researched than Bawer's or Sullivan's, which is why *Life Outside* offers a much more diverse picture of American gay life than do either *A Place at the Table* or *Virtually Normal*.) Certainly, it is difficult to provide accurate figures about an only partially visible minority; after all, the number of gays as a proportion of the total population is still unknown, let alone the exact details of their voting habits. But the effective absence of any objective justification to the claims of gay conservatives inevitably fuels the suspicion that they are projecting their personal preferences and experiences onto this putative 'majority'.[37]

The overly simplistic handling of the already unscientific categories of 'metropolitan' and 'suburban' runs counter to the aims of gay conservatives. If the gay right is motivated by a desire to move beyond what they see as the limiting stereotype of the (radical, promiscuous) ghetto dweller, their response merely amounts to replacing him with an

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role of a gay man dying of AIDS; the film's initially homophobic protagonist develops not only tolerance and sympathy for gays, but also a willingness to fight for their human dignity.

[35] Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), Richard Goldstein's *Homocons: The Rise of the Gay Right* (London, Verso, 2003 [first published as *The Attack Queers: Liberal Society and the Gay* Right (Verso, 2002)]) and Robinson's *Queer Wars* each provide book-length critical reposts to new gay conservatism.

[36] Robinson, *Queer Wars*, p. 110.

[37] With the exception of Signorile, no proponent of gay assimilationism has even considered histories of gay suburban activism. Ironically enough, as early as 1985, The Association of Suburban People, a Detroit-based reformist gay organization founded in 1975, decided to change its name to the more inclusive 'Southeast Michigan Gay and Lesbian Association' (SEMGLA). One of SEMGLA's first newsletters declares: 'The executive board had long recommended that the name of the organization be changed to reflect "what we stand for" to homosexuals and heterosexuals alike.' Evidently, the avowal of a gay and lesbian collectivity was felt to be a more pressing than a continuation of a suburban-styled assimilationist stance.

equally narrowly circumscribed figure, the (moderate, monogamous) suburban resident. Alan Sinfield remarks that Bawer 'asserts that subculture gays "conform almost perfectly to every stereotype" – but intends no irony when declaring that the "lifestyle" of mainstream gays is "indistinguishable from that of most heterosexual couples in similar professional circumstances". That sounds pretty conformist and stereotyped to me.'[38] Bawer and Sullivan do very little to complicate or problematize their political constituency (again, whilst insisting upon their general hostility towards sexual promiscuity, Signorile at least acknowledges the diversity of political opinions amongst gay suburbanites). This simplification is hardly surprising: suburbia readily offers stereotypes of conformity, which so often go unquestioned.[39] What especially angers Sinfield, however, is the manner in which Bawer denies political radicalism a wider place in American society and culture:

> He doesn't acknowledge the radical traditions which have flourished in the United States, from Wobblies to Beats to draft-registers to right-to-choose campaigners (to mention just mainly white movements), and which might equally be called

[38] Sinfield, *Gay and After*, p. 113.

[39] The failed sitcom *Normal, Ohio* (Fox, 2000) was notable for its attempt to challenge the apparent stereotyping of gay men on television as urban, sex-obsessed and/or effeminate. The show's lead character, middle-aged Butch Gamble (John Goodman), returns from Santa Monica, California to his Midwestern hometown, a suburb of Cincinnati, and comes out to his estranged family (his sister, ex-wife and two children, as well as his homophobic parents). Butch, as his name unsubtly suggests, is a world away from the urbane campery of the gay characters from the highly successful Manhattan-set show *Will and Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006); indeed, with his un-gym-toned body and his taste for beer, football and DIY, Butch is a retread of Goodman's well-known role as Dan Conner, the unwealthy, unhealthy husband and father in the long-running sitcom *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-97). Undoubtedly, the creators of *Normal, Ohio* wished to harness Goodman's popularity and, in particular, his easy invocation of an unpretentious working-class masculinity. For Rob Maitra, however, one of the main problems with the show is the substitution of one set of clichés for another: '*Normal, Ohio* counters such preconceived notions [of homosexuality] by presenting a stereotypically heterosexual character who happens to be gay.' (Rob Maitra, 'Getting Back to Normal', *PopMatters*, no date, http://www.popmatters.com/tv/reviews/n/normal-ohio.shtml [accessed 15 December 2005]). Yet, because the show is too squeamish to depict Butch in a sexual or even a non-sexual romantic relationship with another man, *Normal, Ohio* has to resort to the stereotypes that it is supposedly trying to overcome in order to render homosexuality at all visible. Butch, for example, 'sings, "Ding, ding, ding, goes the trolley," as he pours his morning coffee, helps color his sister's hair [and] makes references to *The Wizard of Oz*' (ibid.). Worse, says Maitra, 'viewers, judging by the laugh track, are supposed to laugh at Butch's "gay" behavior, then laugh even harder when others ridicule his behavior' (ibid.). Another problem lies with the artificialness of the show's main premise: simply, a convincing explanation for Butch's return from L.A. is never provided. Despite its creators protestations of not being social pioneers (see Erik Meers, 'The Triumph of Normal', *Advocate*, 19 December 2000, pp. 40-2.) *Normal, Ohio* suffers from being too obvious a vehicle for a mainstreaming project. Such shallowness is counterproductive: conflicts between Butch and his family seem to get resolved without being explicitly settled. In this sense the show suffers the same tensions as the British coming-out stories examined in chapter two: the imperative to demonstrate the acceptability of homosexuality so often runs counter to dramatic requirements. These flaws, magnified by mediocre writing, explain the show's short lifespan: only a pilot and twelve episodes were commissioned by Fox, of which a mere seven were aired. *Will and Grace* has had, quite literally, the last laugh. Despite some equally unstable writing in its infancy and its avowed embrace of many of the aspects of 'subcultural' homosexuality that Bawer insists the mainstream detests, *Will and Grace* managed to last eight seasons, becoming one of the most popular shows in the US. The 'mainstream', it would appear, has distinctly subcultural tastes after all.

'American'. The defining of radicals as 'non-American' is a grossly ideological manouvre, one that aspires to delegitimate far more than les/bi/gay people.[40]

In any case, both Sullivan and Bawer arguably overestimate the radicalism of the gay ghetto. A greater number of writers, and no few organizations, have denounced life in the urban centres as being not radical enough. The gay 'lifestyle', they insist, is not characterized by politics, revolutionary or otherwise, but by vapid consumerism. The radical sexually dissident and anti-capitalist movement 'Queeruption', for instance, has sought to combat the commodification of bodies and sexualities that dominates the lives of urban gays and lesbians. Since 1998 it has organized annual 'politically inspiring and educational gathering[s]' in cities around the world with large visible gay subcultures.[41] As the name suggests, these 'Queeruptions' aim to 'shake up' the moribund conformism of the commercial scene. The movement believes its strong DIY ethos will stimulate committed political and diverse cultural activity: the annual gatherings are 'about us all taking initiative, creating and participating, instead of just consuming a lifestyle sold to us.'[42]

Bawer and his kind would undoubtedly cast the participants of Queeruption and similar groups as 'subculture-oriented', because of their 'uncomfortably left-wing' politics.[43] But as the Queeruption activists readily admit, they constitute a small minority (albeit one that is committed and growing); generally, gay subculture is depoliticized. Indeed, the term 'lifestyle', so frequently applied derogatorily to gay subculture, invokes much more easily the notion of a moneyed leisure class removed from political concerns than it does a politicized one. Moreover, as Michael Bronski comments, the idea of 'lifestyle' has historically had a conservative function, operating 'as a form of social control by defusing the potential for cultural change'.[44] The 'Playboy lifestyle' for instance that emerged in the mid-twentieth century marketed a form of masculinity constructed from the ownership of 'leisure' items, a personal identity 'which represented an alternative to – and relief from – the work-oriented lives of the 1950s married male.' Similarly, because 'a heightened class status [is] attached to buying power', the commodity-oriented 'gay lifestyle' has

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[40] Ibid., p. 114.

[41] So far, London, New York, San Francisco, Berlin, Amsterdam, Sydney and Barcelona. Tel Aviv is the scheduled location for Queeruption 2006.

[42] Athen and Fish, 'Queeruption Zine', January 2004 (updated July 2004 by Spike), http://www.queeruption.org/infozine-sf-2004.htm [accessed 31 October 2005].

[43] Bawer, *A Place at the Table*, p. 34.

[44] Michael Bronski, *The Pleasure Principle: Sex, Backlash, and the Struggle for Gay Freedom* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), p. 141.

considerable potential to assuage anxieties surrounding the low social esteem that has often afflicted gay people.[45]

On the other hand, Bronski and numerous others have acknowledged that gays have long since been building 'community through consumption'. The use of commodities – particularly clothing – has facilitated group recognition amongst an otherwise usually invisible body of people, and the frequenting of commercial establishments – bars etc. – has helped to develop the notion of a 'gay world'. It may be the case that opportunities for resisting hegemonic organizations of sexual identity and practice may arise through the manipulation and reappropriation of commodities. Danae Clark argues that if lesbians have traditionally resisted fashion 'as a way of separating themselves from heterosexual culture politically and as a way of signaling their lesbianism to other women in their subcultural group', more recently many have come to welcome their being targeted as consumers. Over the last two decades fashion culture for lesbians and heterosexual feminists alike has increasingly come to be seen as a 'disruptive' site of 'female resistance, masquerade and self-representation'.[46] Sinfield acknowledges the potential and the appeal of developing sexual identities and subculture through consumerism, but suggests a number of reasons to be cautious. One is that gays and lesbians have been courted by companies across too narrow a base: 'while some gay men have been fêted in some quarters for stylish dress, dancing and music, and lesbians are said to be good at sport as well, all this is notably like the situation of Blacks, suggesting that there are earmarked sectors of economic and cultural activity where dangerous out-groups may be accommodated.'[47] Another, more persistent, suspicion is that the nature of capitalism is such that any political gains made or pleasure derived from commodities 'is always paid for, sometimes by oneself, sometimes by other people.'[48]

A further problem with the gay right's assimilationism concerns their defense of masculine gay men. Virtually all of the texts examined in chapter one suggest that gay urban subcultures, like much of the rest of society, are often dominated by an oppressive masculinism. These coming-out stories indicate that it is effeminate gays who are more likely to be marginalized or punished by both gay and mainstream society. To insist that

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[45] Ibid., p. 142.
[46] Danae Clark, 'Commodity Lesbianism', in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 186-201 (p. 188).
[47] Sinfield, *Gay and After*, p. 164.
[48] Ibid., p. 189.

'straight-acting' gay men are somehow disadvantaged by the effeminacy of others is to completely ignore a chorus of gay experience. Worse, it is entirely hypocritical for an oppressed minority to deflect hostility onto particular members of the same minority; one cannot fight for lesbian and gay equality without fighting for the rights of *all* lesbian and gay people. Wary of the potential contradiction, gay conservatives have argued that effeminate gay men and masculine lesbians (as well as those who partake in 'extreme' forms of sexual behaviour) do not deserve disrespect from their conformist counterparts. Rather, as a numerical minority who draw a disproportionate amount of attention to themselves, they colour straight society's judgement of what a homosexual is. To counteract this tendency, more books and sitcoms featuring 'ordinary' gays and lesbians need to be produced, and Pride marches should be dominated by happy files of gay and lesbian couples, instead of the usual shambles of cavorting drag queens and intimidating formations of dykes on bikes.

The problems with this line of reasoning are manifold. As already suggested, the question of who constitutes a minority and who the majority, and whether it is effeminacy or masculinism that dominates gay subculture, are both debatable issues. Even if the conservatives' claims regarding the constitution of gay subculture were verifiably true, however, the 'public relations nightmare',[49] to use Bawer's expression, of gender and sexual non-conformity will remain irresolvable until homophobia ceases to exist. Tellingly, for instance, Bawer expresses disquiet in response to what he sees at Gay Pride Day 1992 in New York City. Whilst Bawer admits that the parade is itself representational, i.e. dominated by conventional gays – 'most of the marchers were not at all shocking. There were several times more Gay Catholics than Gay Whores, more men in tennis shorts than in underpants'[50] – he is aware of the habit of the Religious Right (and sometimes the mainstream media) to concentrate always on 'fringe elements' in order to paint a certain picture of gays and lesbians. But if it is the case that it *only takes a handful of eccentrics or extremists to affect the way homosexuals are represented*, then the only sure way to prevent the Religious Right from misrepresenting gay people is to eliminate altogether these individuals from public events like Pride marches. Such an action, though, would hardly provide the appropriately proportioned balance between conventionality and non-conformity that the gay right claim they are trying to achieve for gay subculture. Writing

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[49] Bawer, *A Place at the Table*, p. 156.
[50] Ibid., p. 155.

nearly twenty years after White interviewed the editor of *The Advocate*, Michael Warner discovers that contemporary glossy (read: depoliticized, desexualized) gay magazines are at similar pains to 'purify the group'. Warner notes that the masthead for *Hero*, for instance, reads: 'THE MAGAZINE FOR THE REST OF US'. He interprets this as: 'Apparently, "the rest of us" (unlike the other kinds of us) want a gay movement you could take home to Mom. And the first thing that has to go is the sex.'[51] Alternative strategies for tackling homophobia that are more inclusive include the defending of diversity as social virtue, and the attacking of misogyny that underlies anti-effeminacy; both, however, invite the kind of alliance politics that repulse gay conservatives.

The 'Gay Household': Conservative Parents, Radical Kids

Gay conservatives typically couch the retreat from progressive politics in terms of a developmental metaphor: the radicalism of the gay left is considered a stalled infantilism; the rational, accommodating politics of the gay right, by contrast, reflects the silent majority's maturity. Robinson notes that 'the metaphor is so pervasive that it often seems to substitute for a reasoned discussion of the relative merits of adversarial or accommodating tactics [...] Everyone knows that children rebel while adults negotiate.'[52] Whilst the aggrieved militancy of the Gay Liberation Front immediately after the Stonewall riots of 1969 was deemed an appropriate enough response to continued and frequently violent homophobic harassment, Bawer excoriates virtually all forms of confrontational gay and lesbian activism since. Even relatively innocuous practices fail to escape his fulminations, such as the Lesbian Avengers handing out lavender-coloured balloons outside a school in Middle Village, New York in an attempt to promote 'lesbian visibility'. For Bawer though, there are 'good and bad ways of being visible', and these lesbian activists are clearly outside his preferred, narrow definition of respectability. All other forms of political engagement are deemed foolish and immature, and consequently will fail to win the sympathy of straights: 'heterosexuals should be made to recognize that being gay doesn't exclude the possibility of being a mature, responsible adult. Instead, the Lesbian Avengers managed to reinforce the notion of gays as reckless and infantile.'[53] The wilful childishness of gay and lesbian activists is given a further pseudo-psychological explanation by Bawer:

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[51] Warner, *The Trouble With Normal*, p. 42.
[52] Robinson, *Queer Wars*, p. 12.
[53] Bawer, *A Place at the Table*, p. 182.

Many of them have never really liberated themselves from their parents' view of homosexuality as a joke; in order to live with themselves, they have had to adopt a worldview that sees *everything* as a joke, that laughs at everything that has traditionally been taken most seriously, from religion to the family.[54]

But the reverse is always likely to be closer to the truth: for the bitterest of homophobes, homosexuality is no laughing matter; moreover, those on the receiving end are liable to take such hostility subsequently very seriously indeed. Even Signorile deploys the same rhetoric of political maturation: his reference, mentioned above, to the 'tantrum politics' of his ACT UP days implies that they are very much of the past.

The tendency to characterize gay radicals as infantile can have somewhat unfortunate consequences. In a 1973 cartoon from *The Advocate*, radicals (or 'gay irrationals') are depicted as children smashing up the interior of a house or office (figure 4.1). Looking on in horror at the door is a couple labelled 'gay progress' who appear to be the kids' respectably dressed parents. As the patriarch declares, 'every time we think they're out of the 'spoiled brat' stage, something like this happens!'[55]

"Every time we think they're out of the 'spoiled brat' stage, something like this happens!"
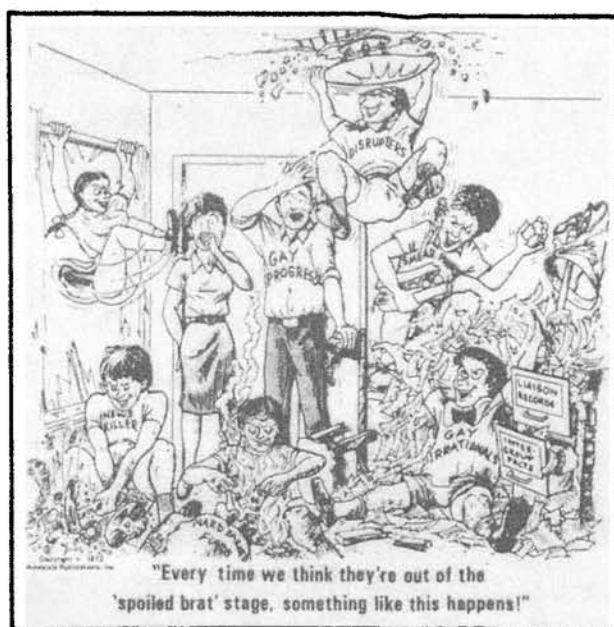
Figure 4.1 Cartoon from *The Advocate*, 1973

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[54] Ibid., p. 183.
[55] Reprinted in Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of a Gay Sensibility* (Boston, MA, South End Press, 1984), p. 183.

Clearly, however, representing 'gay progress' as a heterosexual couple in order to depict the gay left as immature is a mistake. The cartoon suggests that the quest for gay respectability may ultimately require the jettisoning of homosexuality itself. This tendency to erase virtually all traces of homosexuality is for Sinfield the inevitable price of the right's 'mainstreaming' project: Bawer's hope that 'One might imagine a gay couple that most heterosexuals would not even recognise as gay' equates with 'We may be treated the same as everyone else, so long as we *are* the same the as everybody else.'[56] Michael Warner concurs: 'the point of being normal is to blend, to have no visible difference and no conflict.'[57] I mentioned above that Bawer speaks of 'good and bad ways of being visible'. The 'good' kind, then, borders on invisibility; Bawer would have gays and lesbians step back onto the very threshold of the closet. This desire to 'in' homosexuality once again demonstrates the extent of the shared ground between the gay right and homophobic conservative discourse.

This problematic conceit of the gay 'family' or household, with its politically conflicted generations, is still very much in use. A recent conservative weblog entry which has sparked considerable debate contends that in the 'homosexual house' 'Gay conservatives are the parents, and gay liberals are the teenagers.'[58] Gay conservatives evince a wise cynicism, whereas the 'gay liberal mindset is infested with a naive idealism'. The debating styles of either side are characterized in familiar fashion: 'Instead of engaging in a shrill, emotional breakdown, we choose the path of reasoned discourse and steady persuasion.' Aside from the problems outlined above of representing gays as parents, contemporary usage of the familial metaphor runs the risk of a self-serving historical revisionism. Gay conservatives as 'parents' of radical 'children' implies that leftists are historically contingent on a mainstream gay establishment, when in fact it is conservatives who have been always reactive to radicals, as *The Advocate* cartoon suggests. Even Bawer admits that gay conservatism as a movement owes its existence to the endeavors of radical gay activists from the 1960s onwards.[59]

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[56] Sinfield, *Gay and After*, p. 113.
[57] Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, p. 60.
[58] Prism Warden, 'Tell Me Lies and I'll Love You Forever', September 15, 2005, http://prismwarden.blogspot.com/2005/09/tell-me-lies-and-ill-love-you-forever_15.html [accessed 1 October 2005]. For responses, see Gay Patriot, 'Comments on Living Together in the Gay Household', 16 September 2005, http://gaypatriot.net/2005/09/16/living-together-in-the-gay-household/trackback/ [accessed 1 October 2005].
[59] See Bawer, *A Place at the Table*, p. 31.

The emphasis on 'adultness' with regard to politics is rather contradicted by the right's tendency to obfuscate or criticize adult expressions of homosexuality. Bawer, Sullivan and Signorile each champions romantic monogamy whilst disparaging more overt expressions of homosexuality. Whilst of course sex and monogamy are by no means necessarily mutually exclusive, frequently monogamous relationships are presented as the only 'good' kind of gay visibility – where everything *but* homosexuality is apparent. Actually, once again, Signorile's analysis is more complex than a straightforward comparison with either Bawer or Sullivan would suggest. Signorile examines in some detail his informants' attitudes to sex, sexuality and love, and is often frank about the limitations and fragility of monogamy in certain circumstances. However, revealingly, Signorile shows how the ideal of monogamy may combine with a sexless and romantic childhood dream of a suburban home. One interviewee who has moved to suburban New Jersey admits 'If you have a vision of family in your head, you often want to go to the suburbs – grass, trees, a backyard [...] You want to recreate your own family unit or do it better'.[60] Larry Duplechan is even more explicit about the way the ideal of suburban monogamy is forged in childhood:

> As a boy I dreamed of falling in love with a with a man with broad shoulders, strong, gentle hands, and a warm, sweet smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes; I imagined sharing my life with him, all of my life for as long as we lived. I pictured a house of our own on a clean, quiet street, with a patch of evenly mown lawn growing in the front and back. It was my gay child's variation on the old-fashioned Hollywood happy ending, crossed with my impression of the way my parents lived.[61]

Duplechan's childhood vision of the perfect partner and home adopts wholesale the heterosexual standards of his own family and of Hollywood romance. His adult life, moreover, realises these ideals through the suburban dream:

> The street, Stewart Avenue, was everything we wanted: a quiet tree-lined cul-de-sac with only single-family dwellings of pre-World War II vintage. No apartment buildings, no recently erected condo complexes. No wrought-iron bars over the windows, no graffiti sprayed across the fences. The house was a couple of blocks away from a fire station (safe) and a Mormon chapel (spiritual). It looked like the kind of neighbourhood where we had both grown up – Greg in San Jose [...] – and I in Inglewood, a couple of decades before drugs and gang violence would turn that

[60] Signorile, *Life Outside*, p. 196.
[61] Larry Duplechan, 'Mar Vista, California', in *Hometowns: Gay Men Write About Where They Belong*, ed. John Preston (New York: Plume, 1992), pp. 245-56 (p. 245).

L.A. area into a war zone. It was like finding a pocket of suburbia a twenty-minute drive on surface streets from Beverly Hills, where we both worked.[62]

Duplechan's Mar Vista neighbourhood is so perfect – and nostalgic – that it feels like one of the celluloid suburban idylls that inspired him as a child. Appropriately enough, such films articulate the very same desire to escape the degradation and racial violence of urban Los Angeles that Duplechan expresses.[63] Furthermore, in the above extract, there is nothing whatsoever that might suggest the narrator is a gay man, something that would undoubtedly please Bawer. It rather seems then that the ideal of suburbia cannot but displace the idea of homosexuality. Duplechan's entirely conventional suburban imperative amounts to a longing to recreate a version of his childhood family home, a happily-ever-after world of innocence and security.

By contrast, in the same collection, Philip Gambone deems his suburban hometown of Wakefield, Massachusetts 'terribly unsexy'. He opines: 'esthetically and culturally the town felt parental. [...] I could never have the kind of "erotic" relationship with Wakefield that I could have with an urban area like Boston.'[64] Further, Gambone insists that the suburban hometown 'cannot offer *us*, its gay sons and daughters, what we need. Which is the chance to put together lives and families in new and different ways, ways that are much more diverse, global, unpredictable, erotic, and celebratory.'[65] It would, however, be unfair and probably unwise to criticize an individual's ideal living arrangements for not measuring up to some kind of gay or lesbian subcultural standard. In any case, Duplechan describes how he has passed up opportunities for cultivating friendships in Stewart Avenue, preferring instead to focus on 'an emotionally close-knit (if geographically scattered) neighbourhood' of gay friends.[66] But then, the 'suburban imperative', as I have used the expression, is individualistic, or at most aims to recreate a family unit, rarely an idealized community. What is entirely contestable, though, is the right's championing of gay suburban

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[62] Ibid., p. 248.

[63] Eric Avila argues that the 'L.A. Noir' films of the 1940s and 1950s, such as *Double Indemnity, Mildred Pierce* and *The Reckless Moment*, do in fact seek to reveal the dark side behind Southern California's 'most cherished icon', the suburban home. However, the racial and sexual transgression of these films' usually female protagonists is represented by their 'overstepping the boundaries of their suburban world', and becoming one with the metropolis, which is characterized by masculine mobility and racial blackness. The bad ends that these women inevitably meet warn of the dangers of any diffusion between the separate worlds of white suburban domesticity and the Noir city. Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California, 2004), p. 84.

[64] Philip Gambone, 'Wakefield, Massachusetts', in *Hometowns*, ed. Preston, pp. 81-96 (p. 94).

[65] Ibid.

[66] Duplechan, 'Mar Vista, California', p. 252.

resettlement and representations of this resettlement, since fictional and autobiographical texts alike demonstrate conventional suburban life and adult homosexual desire to be effectively incompatible. Bawer in particular demands more maturity from lesbians and gay men; such adultness can be realized in part by the adoption of a mainstream suburban lifestyle. However, it appears that certain associations of childhood which suburbia is liable to evoke have a tendency to interfere with the stated aim of becoming a conventional adult. Far from enabling them to mature, revisiting or settling in the suburbs precipitates the infantilization of gay men.

'Guilt Goes With the Territory': David Leavitt's Suburban Fiction

On more than one occasion, Bawer defends the fiction of David Leavitt against the charge that the suburban domesticity of several of his protagonists is a betrayal of gay subcultural obligations. Bawer is particularly stung by James Walcott's review of the novel *Equal Affections*. For Walcott no-one reflects the 'shift from sexual outlaw to Care Bear' better than Leavitt. Disappointingly, the urban and nocturnal carnality usually associated with gay writing and culture (Walcott invokes John Rechy, author of *City of Night* and *The Sexual Outlaw*) is giving way to something sexless, girlishly saccharine and also dully bourgeois. Bawer, however, claims that it is entirely unfair to criticize a writer for preferring the suburbs over the city, for rejecting 'the extremes of subculture sexuality and sexual politics and [choosing] instead to lead an ordinary middle-class domestic life.'[67] Elsewhere, Bawer identifies Walcott's pillorying of Leavitt as 'an early salvo in what has since become an assault on "gays next door" by straight liberals':

> Consider an editorial in the *New York Times* that appeared in June on the morning of the Stonewall 25 march. After declaring support for gay rights, the editorial criticized 'gay moderates and conservatives' for seeking 'to assure the country that the vast majority of gay people are "regular" people just like the folks next door.' *Like* the folks next door? Look again, *Times* editors: Many of us *are* the folks next door.[68]

Certainly, it is unreasonable and unfair to expect gay men to live one lifestyle rather than any other (though, once again, Bawer's presumption of a suburban 'silent majority' is entirely unsupported). However, unfortunately for Bawer, Leavitt suggests that ordinary

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[67] Bawer, *A Place at the Table*, pp. 207-8.
[68] Bruce Bawer, 'The Folks Next Door', in *Beyond Queer: Challenging Gay Left Orthodoxy*, ed. Bruce Bawer (New York: Free Press, 1996), pp. 293-5 (p. 294).

middle-class domesticity is not all that it is cracked up to be, particularly for gay men. For Leavitt's gay characters, the childhood associations of suburban environments always prove to be debilitating.

Equal Affections is about a white American family, the Coopers. After the children have grown up and departed the family becomes geographically fragmented in the way modern middle-class families frequently do. Louise and Nat Cooper remain in their north Californian suburban home; their folk singer daughter April chooses a carefree itinerant life whilst their lawyer son Danny opts for a life a lot like theirs, settling in suburban New Jersey with his partner Walter.

For Danny, though, the continental distance between his home and that of his parents feels insignificant. The similarities between the two suburban settings and his over-familiarity with both have the effect of leaving Danny unclear about his life's direction:

> Too many times a year he still had to zigzag across the continent to see his parents, back and forth, back and forth, until he could no longer tell which coast was his childhood and which was his adulthood, which was his past and which was his future. After a while it was no longer traveling back and forth; he was always traveling back, no matter which direction he was going in, carrying with him the heavy weights of attachment.[69]

The discomforting symmetry between the two homes and the perpetual regression involved in 'always travelling back' mainly results from Danny not having separated himself emotionally from his mother (as we shall see, a theme that recurs in much of Leavitt's writing). April remarks, for instance, that his kitchen reminds her of their mother's (p. 124). Also, when he reminisces, Danny tends to evoke scenes of maternal domesticity; generally his father is absent (p. 64). Further, a meditation on the nature of his physical intimacy with Walter is immediately followed by thoughts of the strong bond he has with his mother (pp. 26-7). Danny's confusion over his place in the world is not resolved by the end of the novel even after the death of his mother; one of his last actions is recounted thus: 'He left home. He left home and he went home.' (p. 231)

Arguably, Leavitt does not only wish to show how a strong maternal bond may be disorienting or debilitating. *Equal Affections* can also be seen to be celebrating 'the heavy weights of attachment' that family members, as well as lovers, have for each other, despite

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[69] David Leavitt, *Equal Affections* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), p. 13. Subsequent page references given in parentheses.

estrangement and death. For instance, after a period of emotional infidelity Walter returns to his partner, realizing how he is 'inextricably bound with the people who mattered to him and matter to him now, the people whose loves defined him, whose deaths would devastate him.' (p. 241) The novel locates its characters in an eternal lifecycle: Louise's death is followed by the birth of April's daughter, who is named, somewhat inevitably, after her grandmother. Leavitt's humanism is likely to be appreciated by those who are suspicious of specifically 'gay' writing and hostile to a separatist subculture. Bawer, for one, suggests that gay writers would do better to write about 'life' rather than 'what it means to live as a homosexual', as if only universal concerns can be considered appropriate to the category 'literature'.[70] Bawer particularly chastises gay subcultural producers for not being able to share their lives or work with their parents: 'the truth is that all too many so-called radicals have never integrated their sexuality into their lives in the "real" world, the places where they came from and where their families live.'[71] By the 'real world', Bawer of course means suburban or Heartland America, as opposed to the urban ghettos to which he sees so many individuals unnecessarily restricting themselves. Leavitt's characters seem to concur with Bawer that the truly radical act is to live an openly gay life in the suburbs. For instance:

> [Walter] had determined to do something quietly revolutionary: to incorporate his sexual nature into a life of suburban domesticity, uproot the seed of homosexuality from its natural urban soil and replant it in the pure earth of his green garden. It had, by and large, worked, and yet he realized he'd made a singular mistake. For it wasn't just the love of a man he'd been drawn to in his early days in the city; it was the rank garden of the city itself. (p. 109)

Actually, the passage's extended horticultural metaphor makes it entirely clear that the city is homosexuality's 'natural' habitat. This essentialism suggests that gays after all will have a hard time acclimatizing to the 'real world'. Indeed the mechanized regimentation of suburban domesticity has taken its toll on Walter and Danny's sex life, which has dwindled considerably, reliant now on pornographic videos and involving a minimum of physical contact:

> The VCR made a thunking sound, indicating it had finished rewinding. [...] In the kitchen, something bought long ago in the gourmet deli section of King's defrosts;

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[70] Bawer, *A Place at the Table*, p. 198.
[71] Ibid., p. 191.

the sprinklers start their automatic cycle. They pull their pants up and move to opposite sides of the house, each thinking about order, contentment, each wondering whether they are sinking. (p. 26)

Of course, domestic monotony and over-familiarity have the potential to dull the senses of anybody, not just gay men. Leavitt suggests, however, that straight people are privileged: heterosexual love and desire are enshrined in the suburban project. The streets of Carrollton, the Californian suburb in which Louise and Nat raise their children, are named after their builders and their wives – 'Ruthelma Drive, Tedlee Way.' (p. 101) On the other hand, though, Carrollton, a 'bayfill' development, is literally 'built on garbage', hardly auspicious foundations on which to build a suburban idyll. Indeed, the Coopers' marriage founders: Nat imagines the street names to be cursing him (p. 101), and Louise, presented as the most naturally libidinous main character, realizes that she has suppressed her sexuality in order to endure domesticity:

> When, at twenty, she settled [...] with cautious Nat, perhaps she was imagining that in the utopia of California, in that city of the future he was insisting they would soon live in, she would be able to satisfy the urges that had, up until now, pulled her away from Nat and towards a more disreputable, to her more natural kind of life. (p. 104)

Then again, one striking scene implies that, had Louise followed her instincts, she would have been able to accommodate her sexuality within a Utopian suburbia after all. Her adolescent lover returns many years later to her doorstep, older but still suavely handsome, as the suited Allstate insurance man, with 'a tiny, white-shingled house cupped delicately in his hands.' (p. 41) The suggestion here is that extravagant heterosexuality can be domesticated without necessarily losing its allure. The same, however, cannot be said of homosexuality; Danny and Walter's suburbanity is the very antithesis of 'the natural urban soil', 'the rank garden of the city'.

Walter is inexorably drawn back into the metropolis not only for sex but also because of a discomfort with their aping of heterosexual roles:

> Their suburban life, the life he had urged Danny into, seemed absurd to him sometimes, even as he cherished its rituals. What right did they have to such a life? he asked himself. As if two men could be married, like anyone else! How the neighbors must snicker behind their backs! But really what kept him in the office – what kept him from going home – was the fear that he had swindled Danny, that he had betrayed him, and that soon [...] he would have to leave him. (p. 76)

Walter starts meeting other men, though only ever over the Internet: 'he didn't want more than the screen's veiled intimacy.' (p. 79) As soon as one of his online contacts declares his love for Walter without even having met him, however, Walter is startled back into the arms of Danny. Sinfield comments that whilst Leavitt's use of the Internet is up-to-date (indeed, in 1989 it was certainly one of the earliest explorations of cybersex in gay fiction), it actually avoids what would very likely be much more challenging complications. For instance, if Walter 'had gone cruising it might have been more difficult for Leavitt plausibly to retrieve the relationship from (self-) disgust; if he had taken a lover the feelings of this third party would have been an issue.'[72] Sinfield believes that the subtext of *Equal Affections* is AIDS: Walter and Danny's behaviour seems restricted (certainly in comparison to the novel's non-gay characters) because their relationship cannot be divorced from fears about the epidemic. Their suburban monogamy, he contends, rather than supporting an assimilationist project, is in fact 'the emergency response of a damaged subculture'.[73]

Other suburb-located fictions by Leavitt, however, do not seem to exhibit any underlying anxiety about AIDS. Leavitt's novel *While England Sleeps*, set in 1930s London, is seemingly far removed from concerns about epidemic, and his short story 'Territory', published in the early 1980s, predates even the first rumblings of the AIDS crisis, referring to the gay scene of San Francisco when its bath culture was in full-swing. In these stories, it is the suburban landscape that is most troubling. Resonant with memories of childhood and family, contact with the suburban home appears always to precipitate a personal regression, disabling and de-sexing adult gay men.

While England Sleeps is the account of Brian Botsford, a middle-class Englishman (though Americanized since the end of World War II) living in central London in the thirties.[74] Botsford meets East Ender and London Underground worker Edward Phelan at an 'Aid to Spain' meeting. Their ensuing relationship is troubled by Botsford's fear of exposure and pressure from his family to marry. After Botsford becomes involved with a woman hand-picked by his aunt, the jilted Phelan leaves for Spain, joining the International Brigade. Botsford embarks on a rescue mission after Phelan is arrested for desertion, and

[72] Sinfield, *Gay and After*, p. 124.
[73] Ibid, p. 125.
[74] Leavitt was successfully sued by the poet Stephen Spender, who accused the novelist of plagiarising his diaries. My analysis refers to the second version of *While England Sleeps* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1995) published after Leavitt was obliged to rewrite sections which Spender deemed objectionably too close to his own life experiences. Subsequent page references given in parentheses.

though he manages to locate his ex-lover, Botsford is ultimately unable to prevent Phelan dying from typhoid.

Botsford rents a room in Earls Court, which is also where Phelan works, at the local Underground station. Earls Court Station, one of the busiest interchanges of the London Underground network then as now, is also a metaphorical junction, representing Botsford and Phelan's cross-class relationship which has been facilitated by the technological developments of modernity. The two men are from opposite ends of the District Line, Botsford from upper-middle-class Richmond and Phelan from working-class Upney (which is not quite the line's eastern terminus, but certainly off the edge of Harry Beck's original 1930s diagrammatical map of the Underground). Botsford even defines his relationship with Phelan as being between 'Richmond and Upney', two very different suburbs indeed.

Botsford is as preoccupied with a third Underground route and a terminus situated in yet another kind of suburb: Cockfosters at the northern end of the Piccadilly Line.[75] Beyond simply signifying class origins, the Underground network's outer reaches represent for Botsford a metaphorical journey. The termini stand for the disappointment of maturity, of adult reality failing to meet youthful expectations (this developmental metaphor only make sense, of course, if one shares Leavitt's tourist's perception of the city; most Londoners after all live or have origins that are closer to the ends of the lines than to the centre). Botsford is haunted by the incantation 'imagine Cockfosters', a self-penned refrain from his novel 'The Train to Cockfosters'. So great is his investment in the ideal of the end of the line he is ill-disposed to do anything that might debase it: 'I was afraid that if I actually *went* to Cockfosters, I would discover it was just a place, just like any other place. Shops and houses. Women carting groceries. And that reality, for some reason, my youthful imagination could not dare to contemplate.' (p. 62) *While England Sleeps*, then, can be seen to be rejecting the ordinariness attributed to the suburbs by the likes of Bawer. Indeed, in his novel Botsford projects Cockfosters as the domain of an artistic – and homosexual – brotherhood, as the antithesis of the feminine domesticity of 'Shops and houses. Women carting groceries.' In this latter respect, its protagonists evince a hostility to the suburbs that is typical of 1930s British intellectuals. Interestingly, however, the anti-suburbanism of Botsford's characters prompt not the familiar tropes of aerial surveillance or

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[75] In the final chapter Leavitt invokes yet another terminus, with Botsford recalling having relations with 'an accountant from Stanmore' (p. 265), which was then the end of a branch of the Metropolitan Line.

bombardment,[76] but occupation: being 'aggressively antibourgeois [...] the dreaded suburbs come to embody for [them] exactly the opposite of what they embody for most people; genius lives in semidetached houses' (p. 60).

Even after visiting the distant suburbs, though, there remains a persistent disjunction between Botsford's ideas and experience of these places. When voyaging up the District Line to his lover's family home in Upney, Botsford travels with a weight of expectation. For instance, he imagines Edward Phelan's mother to be old and ugly; she is neither. Disappointed, he vows to keep his own creation for his journal. It would seem that, then as now, imagined aspects of the suburbs are not always extinguished after being contradicted through experience. But even more significantly, Botsford's journey to (nearly) the end of the line against the flow of commuters seemingly cannot invoke another terminus, the Richmond of his childhood:

> We were men and women who, like the train we rode, went against traffic, who worked nights, or had bedridden parents to tend to, or were on our way home after waking up in the flats of strangers - the westbound trains, in their normalness, seeming to go backward, to our view, though of course it was they, and not us, who were going forward into the urban day. I closed my eyes. I was imagining I could join them, head home from this nightmare, toward Richmond, childhood, the light playing on the river. My mother, alive, with Nanny and Charlotte: three women drinking coffee in the garden. (172-3)

Botsford's conveyance along the clean lines of the Underground map are eminently reversible: these journeys are just as likely to anticipate the future, the dreams and disappointments of adulthood, as they are to conjure the comfort and security of infancy, an environment, moreover, that is couched in terms of feminized domesticity, as opposed to a masculine, intellectual domain. Suburbia for Leavitt, then, is always ambivalent, and never the stable site of maturity wished for by Bawer and others.

If the imagined suburban landscapes of 1930s Cockfosters, Upney and Richmond seem removed from the concerns of Bawer, even if they capture, in their various ways, suburban ideals, Leavitt's short story 'Territory' – set in 'residential Northern California, the land of

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[76] Such imagery features frequently in 1930s poetry, from C. Day Lewis's rendition of W. H. Auden as a panoptic visionary in the form of a kestrel or a birdman ('The Magnetic Mountain 16', in *The Complete Poems of C. Day Lewis* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 151), to Betjemen's notorious line 'Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough' (John Betjemen, 'Slough', in *Poetry of the Thirties*, ed. Roger Skelton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 74-5, (p. 74)).

expensive ranch-style houses'[77] – is undeniably closer to home. The scenario of 'Territory' at first glance seems to tally with Bawer's preference for representations of gay men who find themselves more comfortable being in mainstream suburban than subcultural urban settings. The story features the return visit of a young gay man from New York City to his childhood suburban home. Something of a prodigal son, Neil Campbell has dismissed his early involvement with the sexual metropolis – 'his excursion into that world had been brief and lamentable, and was over' (p. 7) – and seeks instead to impress his mother with his first stable boyfriend Wayne, 'the only person he has ever imagined he could spend his life with' (pp. 2-3). Neil, then, is seemingly perfectly representative of the suburban-aspirant 'silent majority' of gay men so frequently evoked by Bawer et al.

As the story's title suggests, suburbia is presented as a distinct realm, distinguishable and entirely separate from central San Francisco and New York. But 'Territory' is unlike conventional coming-out stories, where the city and the suburbs constitute mutually defining binaries. Fortunately for Neil, his home environment is a tolerant kind of place; the suburbs of Neil's childhood do not express any ambient hostility and he recalls no memories of early homophobic abuse. Indeed, Leavitt takes care to present this suburban community as instinctively tolerant and liberal, and, moreover, as socially and politically marginalized. As Barbara Campbell wearily comments about her doorstep campaigning for nuclear disarmament, 'In the age of Reagan [...] keeping up the causes of peace and justice is a futile, tiresome, and unrewarding effort; it is therefore an effort only fit for mothers to keep up.' (pp. 1-2) Characterizing Neil's mother and her set as activists for 'peace and justice' serves to limit any blame that might be otherwise apportioned to them: she and her immediate community are fighting against a government decidedly hostile towards gays; her suburban sorority suffer a similar lack of support (and if not active disrespect, then at least passive disregard) from the nation's government and its followers. Effectively then, Neil and his mother are on the same side. His own suburban upbringing therefore cannot fully explain the troubles he may have with regards to his homosexuality.

Territories, however, are not only defined by their spatial boundaries but also by who owns, occupies or controls them. As the above descriptions of her suburban activism suggest, Barbara's world is largely female. The story opens with Neil watching her handing out leaflets all day to 'women dressed exactly like her' (p. 1). Barbara's close friends are all

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[77] David Leavitt, 'Territory', in *Family Dancing* (London: Abacus, 1999 [1984]) pp. 1-29 (p. 10; subsequent page references given in parentheses).

widows or divorcees, and her own husband is shadowy at best – after coming out, Neil recalls how 'His father hung back, silent; he was absent for that moment as he was mostly absent – a strong absence.' (p. 6) This overly feminine – or, more particularly, maternal – milieu, whilst seemingly benign, is shown to disturb not just Neil, but gay male sexuality generally. As president of the Coalition of Parents of Lesbians and Gays, for instance, Neil's mother follows him to the centre of San Francisco, to distribute more leaflets, though this time of a quite different nature:

> On weekends, she and the other mothers drove their station wagons to San Francisco, set up their card tables in front of the Bulldog Baths, the Liberty Baths, passed out literature to men in leather and denim who were loathe to admit they had mothers. These men, who would habitually do violence to each other, were strangely cowed by the suburban ladies with their informational booklets, and bent their heads. (p. 7)

It is entirely appropriate of Leavitt to allude to the masculine, promiscuous San Francisco clones, or 'the men in leather and denim'. 'Clones' by definition require no maternal etiology. They are more or less perfect replications of each other; their subculture is self-sufficiently metropolitan, requiring no recourse to alternative geographies or the history of their genesis, except perhaps for a diffused and mythical allusion to the frontiersman, himself a far cry from a well-meaning suburban mother.[78] But their contact with Barbara and her band of 'suburban ladies' precipitates precisely the same emotion Neil evinces in response to his homecoming: shame. Suburbia, then, is a metonym for maternity. In the thoroughly sex-negative narrative of 'Territory', where sex between men is described, amongst other things, as 'violence', it is the blurring of the boundaries of suburban and urban domains, that is, an awareness of the mother's knowledge of their sexuality, which causes gay men's shame.

In Neil's case this sense of shame prompts a futile attempt to undo such knowledge: 'He winced at the thought that she knew all his sexual secrets, and vowed to move to the East Coast to escape her.' (p. 7) But he cannot escape his mother. His sex-life is haunted by her image, as demonstrated when trying to shake off his ex-partner from San Francisco (on departing 'she did not leave his mind till they were circling New York' (p. 18)), or even when hurrying home with Wayne, anxious to make love to him for the first time (p. 19).

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[78] In the preface to *The Sexual Outlaw*, John Rechy insists upon how his cruising characters had to be 'pastless', in order that they be 'defined "fully" – *by inference* – only through their sexual journeys' (John Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw* (New York: Grove, 1984 [1978], p. 16).

Indeed, in the closing lines, whilst circling New York, Neil makes the laughably self-refuting declaration to Wayne 'I'm not thinking about my mother now.' (p. 29) Since he cannot escape her, Neil attempts to return to his birthplace with his 'serious' boyfriend Wayne in order to prove to his mother that he is something that approximates that which he believes she can be proud. But the architecture of suburbia, invested with memories of his failings, thwarts his every move. As a successful adult he must somehow demonstrate to his mother the mutual attraction between himself and his partner, yet Neil constantly frets whether it will be possible to make love 'in this place of childhood, of his earliest shame, in this household of mothers and dogs' (p. 5). The garden proves just as foreboding: after all, 'they fell in love in bars and apartments, and this is the first time they have made love outdoors. Neil is not sure if he has enjoyed the experience.' (p. 12) The displeasure derives from the sense of surveillance, and the environment's invocation of childhood memories (it is the site of his first sexual feelings – and shame – experienced with his dog). In his mother's presence – or whilst home, which amounts to same thing – Neil cannot assert his adulthood. Ultimately, Neil accepts this state of affairs as inevitable: 'guilt goes with the territory' (p. 28), he declares to his partner – the integrity of the urban and suburban domains re-established – as he flees his mother and the suburbs a final time.

The return to the suburbs by adult gay men, which is central to the gay right's assimilationist project, is an attempt to prove the existence of the 'good homosexual', the gay man who is masculine, moderate and monogamous. Suburban gay men, who, once again, constitute the 'silent majority', are to be celebrated because they demonstrate that gays are effectively just like everyone else. Unfortunately, the right's project is flawed because there is so little scope for representing sexuality. Adult homosexual desire is often obscured in narratives of gay suburban resettlement, either because concerns regarding the stereotyping of gay men lead to the imposition of other stereotypes (clichés of suburban heterosexuality for instance), or because, as in Leavitt's fiction, the suburban landscape is just as likely to invoke powerful and debilitating memories of childhood as it is images of maturity, respectability and responsibility. The gay right, then, have made the common mistake of presuming the suburbs stand for one thing only; it is the polysemy of suburbia that undermines their narrow conjectures.

Chapter Five
Sacrilege in the Sitting-Room: Contesting Suburban Domesticity

Three of the previous four chapters have shown how British and American gay narratives repeatedly deploy the suburbs in order to metonymically represent heterosexual society. The manner in which these stories negotiate the suburbs necessarily shapes their characterizations of gay identity and culture. To depict some kind of affinity between gay men and the suburbs is usually to demonstrate the possibility and desirability of reconciliation – or assimilation – of gay subculture and mainstream society. As the analysis of some of David Leavitt's fiction in chapter four demonstrates, however, imagining the return to the suburbs can be perilous. Retracing the journey that delivers gay identity may reverse that very process: so strong are its associations with the traditional family that returning to suburbia has the potential to smother gay self-identification. Alan Sinfield suggests that this misidentification is an inevitable consequence of gay subculture's incomplete separation from the mainstream: 'for lesbians and gay men the diasporic sense of separation and loss, so far from affording a principle of coherence for our subcultures [as with many ethnic and racial minorities], may actually attach to aspects of the (heterosexual) culture of our childhood.'[1] Such are the difficulties faced by a subculture that finds itself always emergent from the majority culture. Yet this embeddedness confers strategic opportunities. One such advantage, according to Sinfield, is that 'at least we can't be told to go back to where we came from, as happens to racial minorities in Britain.'[2] Even more critically, these very origins in heterosexual culture have the power to disturb: gay and lesbian people are the 'perfect subversive implants, the quintessential enemy within.'[3] Jonathan Dollimore calls this potential to provoke insecurity the 'perverse dynamic', 'that fearful interconnectedness whereby the antithetical inheres within, and is produced by, what it opposes.'[4] Some gay suburban narratives seek to engage with and manipulate this allegedly threatening hybridity. Instead of merely denigrating the suburbs from a safe distance, these texts attempt to infiltrate and *defile* suburbia. Through acts of symbolic subversion, specifically, by disrupting suburban domesticity with the assertion of a homosexual presence, gay characters in these texts aim to undermine hegemonic

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[1] Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), p. 30.
[2] Ibid., p. 31.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 33.

heterosexism. Such acts of desecration are typically facilitated by rendering the domestic interior as a religious space, which is usually a quite straightforward operation given, as I will discuss, certain rooms' established centrality to the rituals of family.

Such attempts to destabilize the hegemony of heterosexuality, however, are usually quite limited in effect. In the fictional texts that I discuss below, dominant forms of sexual and social relations are rarely altered substantially, and never permanently, by attacks made against them at the level of the symbolic. Indeed, the same texts serve rather to puncture the optimism arising in certain debates in the field of sexual geographies, particularly with regards to the practice of 'queering' space. For instance, in the introduction to their anthology of work on geographies of sexualities, David Bell and Gill Valentine make bold claims about queer activism and urban space. Through their reading of canonical queer works such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Bell and Valentine insist that imposing queer sexualities on straight space will both demonstrate the heterosexual sanctioning of ostensibly neutral, public environments and undermine such heterosexism by foregrounding its contingency and performativity. They declare:

> The presence of queer bodies in particular locations forces people to realise (by the juxtaposition 'queer' and 'street' or 'queer' and 'city') that the space around them [...] the city streets, the malls and the motels, have been *produced* as (ambiently) heterosexual, heterosexist and heteronormative. And, to take the deconstruction a step further, [...] taking to the streets in such a perverse parade of genderfucking should begin to reveal that this heterosexing of space is a performative act naturalised through repetition – and destabilised by the mere presence of invisibilised sexualities.[5]

Such confidence in queer praxis's potential for disruption – 'the *mere presence*' of queer bodies '*forces* people to realise' that the space around them is heterosexist etc. – is unsubstantiated. Not only are none of the contributors to *Mapping Desire* able to show *how* this realization occurs, they are also consistently unclear about exactly *who* is forced to realize the nature of straight space. Is it all heterosexuals, or only other queers? The rhetoric of Bell and Valentine et al., for example, their constant use of terms such as 'disrupt', 'destabilize' and 'subvert', certainly suggests that it is the former. As the definitions given in the OED suggest – 'to bring disorder' (for 'disrupt'); 'to overturn, overthrow or upset' (for 'subvert') – these words have been chosen because they connote significant political

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[5] *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 18.

impact. Yet, on closer inspection, far from being confrontational, strategies of queering space are usually discreet, even secretive. Consequently, any awareness of the contradictions of heterosexism remains limited to the queer individual. Lynda Johnston and Gill Valentine's essay on negotiating lesbian identities in domestic environments is typical of this misrepresentation of strategies of queering space: 'the heterosexual family home isn't only a site of repression, but also a site of subversion', they declare.[6] By being able to reread *as lesbian* symbols of heterosexual culture such as musicians, athletes and TV programmes, the authors claim that 'lesbian culture can effectively take the symbols of heterosexuality and throw them back in its face.'[7] But the manipulation of straight symbols does not afford queer people this power. There is no question of lesbians in this context directing anything back into the 'face' of heterosexuality since, as the writers themselves show, such activities are necessarily always covert: the whole point is that the straight family is unaffected, left none the wiser. Rather than striking powerfully at the heart of the heterosexist family home, these performances seem more like rather desperate holding patterns, whereby 'women can *eke out* a lesbian identity in a home environment that is constraining and repressive' [my emphasis].[8] Therefore, even to gain a private awareness of heterosexuality's inconsistencies does not automatically improve one's situation significantly. Indeed, in Johnston's and Valentine's account, in the family home (and even in the 'lesbian home') lesbians face restrictions and the constant threat of surveillance.[9] At worst, the voluble optimism of proponents of queering space could well encourage individuals to endure a hostile environment in the belief that their actions have some material consequence.

The novels examined in this chapter are all sensitive to the attractiveness of a queer approach to suburban space, but are also keenly aware of its limitations. Each text demonstrates that power relations are not necessarily disabled by their being shown to be neither natural nor inevitable. The inability of gay suburban narratives to undermine

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[6] Lynda Johnston and Gill Valentine, 'Wherever I Lay My Girlfriend, That's My Home: The Performance and Surveillance of Lesbian Identities in Domestic Environments', in Bell and Valentine, *Mapping Desire*, pp. 99-113 (p. 103).

[7] Ibid., p. 104.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Linda McDowell's work in the same volume on the performance of gender in City workplaces shows women to 'explicitly recognis[e] that they were constructing a gender performance to meet workplace demands.' Linda McDowell, 'Body Work: Heterosexual Gender Performances in City Workplaces', in Bell and Valentine, *Mapping Desire*, pp. 75-95 (p. 94). As with the lesbians in Johnston's and Valentine's essay, there is nothing automatically subversive about such performances; they are more likely to be methods for coping with the strains of the (masculinist) social environment.

heterosexual familialism is further compounded by the tendency, as alluded to by Sinfield and evidenced by the fiction of David Leavitt, to become deeply attached to the family home and its environs. Suburban homes readily conjure the most soothing aspects of early life: the stability and comfort of the domestic interior and the calming predictability of the ubiquitous suburban exterior. Just as reassuring as soft furnishings and iterative streetscapes are the strong affective ties of family. Indeed, the material backdrops of the suburban interior and exterior often metonymically represent, respectively, maternal and paternal roles. The familial environment is so comforting because it constitutes a pre-sexual space. If emergent adolescent sexuality, one of the first drives that breaks the containment of the family, generates at least as much shame as it does pleasure, then the family home in gay narratives is very likely to be viewed nostalgically as a pre-lapsarian ideal.

Yet, suburbs are typically also sites of sexual discovery. So, evidently, there is a potential contradiction between two appealing aspects of the suburbs: the pre-sexual confines of the family and the sexualized landscapes of suburbia. Equally, attempts to validate suburban territories, such as sites where men meet together to have sex, conflict with strategies of subverting the suburban home when images of domesticity are ascribed to places like cruising areas. Some gay suburban narratives are structured by the exploration and attempted resolution of these tensions. Oscar Moore's novel *A Matter of Life and Sex* (1991), which I examine in some detail, bears sustained analysis as it is so acutely aware of the contradictory attractions of the suburbs – in particular, of the suburban domestic interior – whilst offering sophisticated yet ultimately unsuccessful coping strategies. James Robert Baker's *Tim and Pete* (1993) similarly demonstrates the allure that domestic environments may have for gay men, but suggests that a more effective way of responding to suburban space insists upon uncovering specifically sexual gay histories.

'Suburban Schizophrenia': Cottaging vs. Villadom

Set largely within the suburbs of north London, Oscar Moore's *A Matter of Life and Sex* is a distinctly hybrid text. As Esther Saxey astutely observes, *A Matter* straddles two principle gay genres of writing: the coming-out story, and the AIDS narrative.[10] The novel's composition, interweaving the guilt-laden first part of the coming-out story with the later part of the AIDS narrative – the descent through illness and towards death – suggests bleak

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[10] Esther Saxey, 'Homoplot: The Coming out Story as Identity Narrative' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2003), pp. 104-12.

reading indeed. Furthermore, *A Matter* offers no respite in the form of a sustaining gay subculture, which might have rendered all the anguish of the process of coming out worthwhile, or provided support for those suffering with AIDS. The novel's protagonist Hugo Harvey judges his condition a bitter irony, having caught a 'gay disease' when he has kept himself 'so firmly outside the scene, standing on the touchline with his back turned'.[11] Alan Sinfield comments that Hugo 'prefers to imagine that being a call-boy is not part of the "gay scene"'.[12] Hugo similarly excludes the subculture of cruising and cottaging that he becomes heavily involved in, which I will examine in detail below.

Hugo's ambivalence towards the gay 'community', as he sees it, is certainly exacerbated by his complete preoccupation with his suburban home environment. The text is strongly drawn to both pre-sexual and sexualized visions of the suburb. Yet, simultaneously, Hugo wages a one-man war against the site that represents hypocrisy and repressive conformity: the suburban household. *A Matter* negotiates the contradictory attractiveness and repellence of suburbia through a performance of hybridity. The protagonist enacts a schizophrenic separation, becoming two characters: Hugo the mother's boy, decorous and domestic, subsequently to be found 'round the tea-table over bread and jam and a slice of cheddar cheese', and David, 'the one who played in strange men's bedrooms, cars, offices and kitchens. The one who didn't have a family, who didn't have any school to go to or tea to go back for.' (p. 27) The division between these two personae is as strict as the separation of the worlds they respectively inhabit. David is originally created as a means of protecting Hugo's identity: such a distinctive name renders him too easily locatable if he were ever to get into trouble (p. 26). The fear of exposure, however, runs both ways:

> For all David's street-tough masquerade, it was Hugo who frightened people. [...] Once sex was over and a spent David dissolved, leaving a tense and testy Hugo in his place, David's catches were unnerved to find an intelligent, nicely-spoken local boy in their house. It was as if they felt they had less to fear from the tough little tyke who might blackmail them than from the nice local schoolboy who might tell his parents and remember the address. (p. 38)

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[11] Oscar Moore, *A Matter of Life and Sex* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992 [first published under the pseudonym Alec F. Moran (London: Paper Drum, 1991)]), p. 234. Subsequent page references given in parentheses.
[12] Sinfield, *Gay and After*, p. 41.

The 'nicely-spoken'/'street-tough' Hugo/David figure is certainly also a performance of class difference, and arguably, their enforced separation is distinctly suburban in character – the creation and maintenance of class-segregated environments being one of the original motivations frequently presumed to have driven and sustained suburbanization.[13] Nevertheless, the distinction between Hugo's housebound identity and David's streetwise mobility is more significant. True enough, David's lack of any need to return to school or to tea is itself only an enactment of autonomy. For Hugo does indeed need to return home: '[The men] never understood that David's time was limited by Hugo's parents. And by Hugo himself.' (p. 29) However, sex in the suburbs does afford Hugo/David a multi-faceted form of liberation from suburban domesticity. For the 'cottages', the public toilets on suburban side and high streets where David spends most of his time waiting for sex, actually offer a welcome respite from the emotional vacuity of suburban aspiration. From a surprisingly tender age, his home suburb of Hadley has instilled in Hugo a keen sense of material inadequacy. The daily walk from his parents' modest 'villa' home at 40, Mulberry Avenue, past the increasingly expansive and well appointed homes of his friends, to his hilltop primary ('St Monica's C. of E. School for Children of the Comparatively Affluent' (p. 8)), literally requires repeated social climbing. Whilst David's absence of any middle-class mores is also a performance, what is not is the way the cottage replaces the large detached house as the pinnacle of social achievement, and how cottaging in general represents an alternative form of sociality. Indeed, not insignificantly, the Hadley venue is referred to by David as 'the cottage at the top of the hill' (p. 48).

As well as providing a simple alternative to conventional home life, the cottage also offers a form of cultural heritage and a sense of history otherwise absent in Moore's suburbia. The public toilet in Hadley is seen as ideal because of its age and its partial isolation from the public, both aspects offering the men who frequent the place a degree of autonomy:

> It was a perfect cottage, semi-secluded but with good parking and a strong flow past of accidental customers; Victorian architecture allowing for the right degree of decay – wooden doors with holes, dim lighting, fifty-odd years of graffiti, no space for an attendant, and within easy reach of the shops, allowing for an endless variety of excuses to cover an endless variety of visits. (p. 33)

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[13] See for example Mark Clapson, *Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the USA* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), pp. 69-72, and Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic, 1987).

The description's resemblance to an estate agent's patter – the place appears characterful whilst remaining practical – is probably a pun on 'cottage'. The public toilet is therefore being consciously offered, again, as an alternative site of interaction to the middle-class suburban home. However, the Hadley cottage is not simply valued because it is old. The toilet's decrepitude, for instance, is only appealing because it is useful; that is, conducive to having sex. Similarly, the ancient graffiti are like so many dead letters: only the minority of messages which arrange meetings in the future are of interest. Moreover, David has nothing but vitriol for the older men who may well have laid down the earliest inscriptions; there is no positive inter-generational interaction to speak of at all. Nevertheless, the very accumulation of these messages, ignored and left unerased by the wider public and the authorities, lends historical weight to a territorial claim on the cottage. One of the functions of graffiti is, after all, the demarcation of territory. And indeed, non-cottaging toilets are referred to as 'Dead territory. The writing was on the wall', both figuratively and literally: 'a few football slogans, some furious racism, a half-rubbed off story [about a] man whose wife wanted three men in a bed and was horny as hell but that was two years ago according to the date at the bottom' (pp. 27-8). Cottage literature (sometimes referred to as 'loiterature') is also instructive, putting into words or pictures – no matter how crudely – the desires of the uninitiated, whilst re-assuring the same individuals that their sexual feelings are not unique.[14] The proliferation of erotic narratives and drawings in cottages has a somewhat more complex social function than the simple trysting scrawl. Such stories do sometimes operate like the more straightforward messages, written as a means to sex, left as elaborate bait by 'the sexual hermits [who wait] in silence behind the cubicle door'. Indeed, Hugo warns that one must not allow oneself to get too aroused from reading them lest one be 'finished before anything started' (p. 28). But importantly, these 'lurid concoctions' also literally inscribe the physical structures of the public toilet with scenes from a gay sexual fantasia. It is, therefore, not difficult to see how the physical place can be conceived of as, reciprocally, a gay space in a gay imaginary.

A further positive aspect of suburban gay sex and its associated social interaction is the manner in which it transfigures the environment's bland and joyless terrain. Filtered through the eyes of a member of the secret ·subculture of cottaging, suburbs are

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[14] See William L. Leap, *Word's Out: Gay Men's English* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 75-89.

transformed, rendered in explicitly exotic and carnivalesque terms. Cottages are referred to as 'pleasure palaces' (p. 35). The act of cottaging is described as a play, with cast lists (p. 41), as a carnival (p. 41), and a 'parade' (p. 98), but most often as an elaborate dance, the 'toilet tango'. These carnivalesque transformations do, in part, make up for the seediness and tedium of cottaging. Indeed some of the descriptions focus in on the exoticness and the eroticism, and then the banality and repulsiveness of the locations and practices, within the same paragraph, or even in a single sentence. For example, the excitement and the perpetual motion, the elegance and close physical involvement with other participants of the tango describe the highs of cottaging. Yet the dance also incorporates David's experience of the flipside: the wasted hours and the boredom of standing motionless; the frustration of not connecting, or of failing to connect satisfactorily, after which David is hit by a post-coital 'grey wave of depression.' (p. 39)[15]

Gay Archaeologies

Whilst distinctly ambivalent, the cottaging 'scene' still constitutes *A Matter*'s most substantial and positive evocation of a sexually dissident subculture. In particular, the sense of the cottage's history is one of its most reassuring aspects. Other AIDS narratives similarly seek to uncover – and recover – gay suburban histories. For instance, James Robert Baker's *Tim and Pete*, set in L.A. immediately after the riots of 1992, unearths several sites rich in gay history. The predominant metaphor of rediscovery is archaeological: the eponymous duo's journey takes the protagonists through the temporary ruins of a metropolis that is constantly re-building itself: the swaths of devastation in South Central after the riots; the shell of Tim's family home; a gay dancehall out in Larchmont, now a Hindu centre, and a derelict gay bathhouse that now, bleakly, 'looks more like a

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[15] Written a quarter of century earlier, Alfred Chester's short story 'In Praise of Vespasian' possibly constitutes a model for Moore's account of cottaging. Certainly, Chester waxes hyperbole about the lowly facilities' transformation: 'So we find our hero on his first trip to London [...] going down a dingy flight of steps, putting a penny in the coin-lock, and entering a badly-lighted wooden booth whose decorated walls strike from the dimness as glorious as the Sistine Chapel, pious as Pompeii, breathless as Lascaux, ideal as Eden.' Like Moore, Chester interprets the cottage graffiti as historical evidence of homosexual activity: 'who could think evil here when a thousand generations of Britons have come to pencil and carve out their dreams.' Also like Moore, Chester characterizes the negotiation of cottage tryst as an intricate sequence of dance steps: 'The solid English boot and the frail Parisian sandal begin a series of dances. On either side of the wall, they cautiously minuet, then timidly waltz, then tentatively fox-trot, then anxiously tango, then briefly and frenetically rumba – and the manly boot comes abruptly but gently to rest on the quivering sandal.' Alfred Chester, 'In Praise of Vespasian', in *Behold Goliath*, (New York: Sphere, 1968 [1965]) pp. 135-56 (pp. 144-5).

mausoleum'.[16] Viewing the 'monumentally dilapidated' venue of Pete's gig, a hotel 'set for demolition', Tim declares 'nothing lasts in this city'. Yet in the same breath he reckons the place to be 'just brimming with history, too' (p. 111). Through the evacuation or destruction of the urban fabric, this history is rendered visible. Much of the gay history is to be found, not in the ostensible gay centre of West Hollywood, but in outlying areas. At Long Beach, for instance, amongst the foundation grids of the amusement park's demolished buildings which are laid out in the manner of the site of archeological dig, Tim comes across 'an expanse of brown, tile-patterned linoleum.' (p. 55) Like a crumby equivalent of a Roman mosaic, the old flooring constitutes an historical stratum that evokes memories of teenage sexual pleasure in the seedy arcades. This reconnection with sexual histories demonstrates how gay characters like Pete and Tim have to deal with their promiscuous pasts before AIDS. That both come to positively accept their histories indicates their ability to locate a gay presence in suburbia that is both independent of family structures, and one that is based on pleasure, not guilt or frustration.

These imagined gay suburban environments strongly contrast with the straight suburb: equally decrepit but sexless, without history, future, or an identity in their interminable replication. Consider the following account of Orange County sprawl, which stretches like 'a corporate Ukraine, mile after mile of flat tracts and malls and chain stores.' Tim declares:

> The last time I'd been here, in the seventies, it felt like the future, a vapid new world for white suburban families fleeing L.A. That was still true, but the future now looked like this minimall. Not more than five years old but already seedy, weeds growing along the walkways. Most of the units were bare and unfinished. One had been something for a while. In its window there was a sun-faded poster of has-been teen pop star Debbie Gibson. Her lips were KS purple. 'Electric Youth', it said. (p. 39)

Tim's first experience of Orange County suburbia in the seventies is contemporary with his early sexual exploits at Long Beach, but unlike his ingenious use of the modest resources that the landscape offered him there, the 'vapid' tracts possess only an absence of purpose, a lack of functionality. Moreover, the passage's unpopulated emptiness gives the impression that the inhabiting white suburban families have been decimated by plague; indeed, sinisterly, the 'has-been teen pop star', herself a token of futurelessness, is said to

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[16] James Robert Baker, *Tim and Pete* (Manchester: Ringpull, 1995 [1993]), p. 147. Subsequent page references given in parentheses.

have lips the colour of a Kaposi's Sarcoma, the skin lesion associated with AIDS. The intimation of a landscape emptied by epidemic is not an imagined effect of a vengeful infection of straight suburbia with HIV; in any case, to express a wish for another person to catch AIDS is seen, in other parts of the novel, to be a taboo of the highest order. Rather, the wasteland of Orange County is an expression of the equivalence between the devastation of AIDS and the combined destructiveness and vacuity of vision inherent in mainstream culture in general and in the suburban dream in particular. The title of Gibson's song compounds the comparison between AIDS and the mainstream's propensity for (self-) destruction. 'Electric Youth' presages Pete and Tim's later analogy between gay men – particularly younger gay men – and 'replicants', the androids who inhabit the apocalyptic metropolis in the film *Blade Runner*. The replicants of Ridley Scott's 1982 science-fiction film have no past or future of their own; they are implanted with prosthetic memories of their origins and have a finite lifespan, enforced by the authorities. Young gays are like replicants, partly because the threat of AIDS overshadows their lives (thanks in no small part to the inaction of the US government) but also because gay urban culture is so fleeting and youth-obsessed; hence they are as doomed as their straight counterparts buying into the 'vapid new world' of suburbia. Also, unlike Pete and Tim, gay replicants have no independent histories: all they have are 'photos of their midwestern moms. Don't tell them she doesn't exist. They'll start crying.' (p. 172) Tim's comments here are in imitation of the scene in *Blade Runner* where a replicant's own identity is revealed to be manufactured. To deny the existence of young gays' suburban/provincial origins effectively suggests clutching at tokens of parental affiliation provides insufficient grounds for a gay identity.

As chapter four demonstrated, much of David Leavitt's fiction works in precisely the opposite direction, and strongly attaches to childhood visions of the family at the cost of an independent adult sexuality. Returning home to visit his mother in his suburban home Neil Campbell relives his earliest sexual experiences, concluding that 'guilt goes with the territory'.[17] Subsequently, he seeks to undo the shame and the imposition he feels he has caused his parents by coming out by imagining himself mothered once again, 'wrapped [...] in the childhood smells of perfume and brownies'.[18] Hugo, however, seems to have more in common with Pete and Tim than Leavitt's characters: on his sickbed, Hugo insists he has 'conquered regrets for things done. The past was not to be denied' (p. 57). But, as

[17] David Leavitt, 'Territory', in *Family Dancing* (London: Viking, 1985) p. 1-29 (p. 28).
[18] Ibid., p. 6.

we shall see, his validation of his own promiscuity is far from substantive; indeed, his sex life becomes a means of infiltrating and despoiling the domestic sphere.

Parlour Games

The suburban cottage in *A Matter* provides an alternative site of social interaction to the family home. However, the very language used to describe suburban sex – including the term 'cottage' – draws heavily on references to domesticity. *A Matter*, then, exhibits a strategy of manipulating signifiers of the home in order to both denigrate and recuperate suburban domesticity. For example, another of David's names for the cottage is 'piss-parlour.' (p. 98) This oxymoronic term rather resembles the names for diminutive emporia that specialize in singular, indulgent goods or services (e.g. beauty parlour, ice cream parlour). As before, David's sexualized reading of the suburbs creates space for delight that is separate from the heterosexual family home, whilst acknowledging the frequent unpleasantness of the environment. But, inescapably, the use of 'parlour' also evokes the very epicentre of bourgeois, feminized domesticity. A particularly Victorian incarnation of the sitting-room, the parlour was, in most British middle-class homes in the nineteenth century, 'the center of the home and the most important room in the house', and also 'very distinctly gendered feminine'.[19] Women were wholly responsible for the furnishing and ornamentation of the room, becoming 'curators' of the interior space that accentuated not only familial wealth but also the domestic order.[20] In *A Matter*, total female suzerainty over the domestic interior is strongly reinforced by the ascription of a reciprocally feeble masculinity to the suburban exterior environment. A leering old man who surprises Hugo is of the same colour as the streets and houses and is able to merge with 'the colourless patina of suburbia' (p. 43). The man is the exact opposite of a later description of an elderly woman, who stands uprightly, quite out of proportion and 'brightly coloured in a small suburban sitting room.' (p. 315) Hugo sees his kind but ineffectual father as similarly diffused into the external fabric of suburbia, 'remaining in the background where he had always been, where he was comfortable.' (p. 183) As a ghostly presence at his own funeral, Hugo cannot even recognize the man on his mother's arm: 'it could have been his father. It

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[19] Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 22-31.

[20] Vron Ware, 'Political Pincushions: Decorating the Abolitionist Interior', in *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior*, ed. Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) pp. 58-83 (p. 62).

could have been Mr Smithy from Number 16. They both had black hair' (p. 316). In Hadley, fathers are ubiquitous suit-and-tied commuters, identifiable only by door number. Expressions like 'piss-parlour', then, directly assault the domestic interior, singling out in particular the primary ordering feminine presence, the mother.

Moore's use of the word 'parlour' is manifoldly apposite. For, whilst seemingly anachronistic, the term rests comfortably with the numerous other descriptions of 1970s domestic interiors in *A Matter*. The reception rooms of these suburban houses are uniformly heavily furnished and ornamented. Whilst expressions like 'chintz-and-glass' constitute a refrain to denounce conservative suburban morality (e.g. with his friend Cynthia's temporary disapproval of his friends and his sex life, 'her voice [took] on an edge that sounded like net curtains and chintz sofas and bone china cups' (p. 152)), these terms also castigate the Victorian-style 'density' of these interiors. For just like the nineteenth-century parlour, these rooms, overladen with soft furnishings etc, are defined by – or from Hugo's perspective, choked by – femininity. Indeed, 'chintz' as an emblem of old-fashioned English suburbanity has remained in broad parlance.[21]

The use of 'parlour' is, moreover, especially appropriate because, like the cottage, it blurs the boundary between public and private. According to Thad Logan, 'the public/private distinction becomes tenuous in the vicinity of the parlour'.[22] The room was a space for attending to visitors, and therefore the most formal, public place of a private house. But the parlour also constituted a private retreat for the family. The toilet/cottage oscillates between the same distinction: as toilet, a public space for a private function; as cottage, a (semi-)secret site for either public display (at the urinals), or partially private consummation (in the cubicles). Additionally, the parlour is the only room in the house not given over to biological functions. With '*piss*-parlour', Moore expropriates bourgeois refinement to the toilet/cottage, elevating it above the merely bodily level, whilst

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[21] David Gilbert and Rebecca Preston note that a 1997 television advertising campaign for the Swedish furniture giant Ikea calls on homeowners to 'chuck out their chintz': 'in an archetypal bay-fronted suburban street, a crowd urges people to defenestrate their frilly patterned sofas, armchairs and lacy curtains in an act of soft-furnishing reformation.' The advertisement's contradistinction between English suburban fustiness and Scandinavian-style modernism 'was working within well-established understandings of suburban culture and the place of the modern within it.' Indeed, apart from a new, 'very 1990s' knowing irony, Gilbert and Preston insist the Ikea ads actually make the same case as earlier campaigns of other companies trying to sell affordable modern furniture. David Gilbert and Rebecca Preston, '"Stop being so English": Suburban Modernity and National Identity in the Twentieth Century', in *Geographies of British Modernity: Space and Society in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David Gilbert, David Matless and Brian M. Short (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) pp. 187-203 (pp. 194-5).

[22] Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, p. 27.

simultaneously soiling domestic decorum and feminine civility by association. The term also brings to mind several instances, examined below, where David does actually defile domestic interiors with bodily fluids.

Indeed, the cottage-as-parlour echoes the way in which many of David's sexual adventures end up within, or rather, lead him back to, suburban domestic interiors. A key example of this redirection, an account of Hugo's conspirators on the cottaging scene, begins to reveal what is at the heart of Hugo's sexual dissidence. Once again, just like the act of cottaging, and the venue itself, the other cottagers are rendered simultaneously carnivalesque and barren. David says of his fellow 'dancers': 'like all good tangos, like all good carnivals, the cast list was varied and colourful.' Yet the first two examples that immediately follow are anything but:

> Married men on the run from loneliness who took David to high rise apartments, peachy with the smells of female laundry and did sex with him on the marital bed before fleeing, ducking the gaze of fascinated neighbours. Quiet men living in solitary confinement in suburban backwaters with untended gardens and unhoovered carpets, whose lives revolved around the television, the Music for Pleasure record collection and the fridge. (p. 41)

The lives and homes of these two types of men are about as far from the carnival as it is possible to get. Neither varied nor colourful, each kind appears to lead a bleak and lonely existence. Also, the homes of both are equally defined by femininity – either a stifling presence (soft fabrics again, this time with a distinct and cloying aroma), or a crippling absence. Another conspirator, 'the Blue Cortina Man', seemingly sounds racier, since he is defined purely by his car, and therefore his mobility. But he as well turns out to be rooted to an exceptionally feminine base, living 'in a room with chintz-covered sofas and little lace cloths and occasional tables' (p. 49).

Whilst sex in suburbia is initially offered as an alternative to heterosexual family life, as discussed in the previous section, the same practices now inexorably redirect David/Hugo back to the feminine domestic sphere. In fact, the dull domesticity of these men is the only thing that really excites David: they only succeed in becoming carnivalesque when he is able to disrupt the feminine interior, either in the cottage *qua* parlour, or after having been led back to the sitting-room proper. David has obviously a considerable erotic investment in such spaces: 'the chintz and quilts and ornamental mantelpieces of their suburban sitting rooms only made him more randy. It was desecration and blasphemy in the sitting room'

(p. 116). This sacrilege is not diffuse, broadly targeting, as one edition's back-cover blurb claims, 'suburban hypocrisy'.[23] The narration does insist at one point that such an attack formed, more or less, the protagonist's motivation: 'For all that Hugo wanted to take revenge on the normal world, wanted to take it for a ride and charge it double, he didn't want to shock his mother.' (pp. 179-80) But the defiled icon in question is manifestly nothing and no-one but his mother. After all, it is Mrs. Harvey's own children who are said 'to be caught up in her cult' (p. 12). Like a primitive pagan deity, fused with the omnipotence of the Christian god, she is the singular emotional pole in Hugo's world throughout his life: 'Hugo loved his mother. And he hated her. She was the most frightening person in his world and the only real authority he recognized. She was god. He was quite sure that if the god at Sunday school ever met her he would do whatever she told him to.' (p. 11)

The designation of Hugo's sitting-room sex as sacrilegious is, then, entirely appropriate. The suburban domestic interiors of the men he has sex with are not exactly temples dedicated to his mother, but they metonymically represent his quasi-religious reverence for her. Hugo's 'desecration and blasphemy' is, then, precisely a way of attacking his mother. His 'irreligious' acts are therefore much less part of a broader political gesture of disrupting the heterosexual home. To re-invoke the parlour here further compounds the deification of the mother figure in the home. Alison Ravetz argues that in the first half of the twentieth century, the domestic interior was not 'designed to accommodate religious observances – the only vestige of this once important function of the home was in the parlour, with its hearth, family photographs and family Bible'.[24] Indeed, the parlour typically 'contained [...] family treasures: ritual objects like religious and royal portraits, candlesticks, the best clock.'[25] The parlour was the only significantly ritualized space in the house, where 'family' was infused with a religiosity not found elsewhere. Significantly, the transition from parlour to 'sitting-room' in the mid-twentieth century was more than a mere updating of nomenclature. Ravetz contends that 'this was to do not so much with social status as the needs of different members of the household, most particularly teenagers, who might be driven out of the house altogether in the evenings

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[23] Oscar Moore, *A Matter of Life and Sex* (New York: Plume, 1993), back cover.
[24] Alison Ravetz with Richard Turkington, *The Place of Home: English Domestic Environments, 1914-2000* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1995), p. 149.
[25] Ibid., p. 156.

unless they could get away from the family in the living room.'[26] The change implies that the parlour was rendered less family-oriented (and, likely, more neutrally gendered) precisely as a means of containing the family. Evidently, Hugo's sitting-room physically more closely resembles the earlier form, the parlour (which, again, metonymically stands for his mother): he is repulsed by it, yet returns to versions of the same room time after time. If nothing else, this very repetitiveness demonstrates the inefficacy of Hugo's attempts in either disrupting ('charging double') the suburban world, or more specifically, in disturbing his mother.

The Suburban City

After Hugo ostensibly leaves his Hadley home for good, the 'suburban schizophrenia' enacted by Hugo/David is immediately redundant. Upon his departure, 'suddenly the whole infrastructure of Hugo's lies had become obsolete' (p. 182) and the figure of David evaporates, since Hugo is finally free from the requirement to keep his sex life and family life separate. Yet, despite his repeated attempts to locate a metropolitan-based sexually dissident subculture, Hugo ultimately discovers that there is no escape from suburbia. Suburban domesticity encroaches upon, and even overruns, the supposedly libidinous city. Moore's suburbanized city is further evidence of *A Matter*'s inability to contest the structures of heterosexuality. The protagonist's failure to emerge from heterosexual space renders impotent all of the attacks he makes against it; simply, Hugo has not managed to create any distance between what he is and what he hates most. In a quite negative sense, then, *A Matter* actually confirms the basic premise of the coming-out narrative, that *what* you are is in large part defined by *where* you have got to. Given that a spatial separation from the heterosexual sphere is required to establish gay identity, it is hardly surprising that Hugo is always ambivalent about his status as a gay individual; gay subculture to him is not the antithesis of suburbia, but its embodiment.

All of Hugo's adventures in central London reveal it to be essentially suburban and characteristically feminized, or otherwise dependent on the suburbs, emotionally and economically. Casting the centre in this way renders it unreachable: it forever constitutes a replica of, or transports one to, the place that one has left. The traditional escape route of youth to London town has effectively been redirected into a cul-de-sac. Watching male

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[26] Ibid., p. 158.

prostitutes on Piccadilly, for example, Hugo is dismayed that his romanticised image of the rent-boy is hopelessly dated:

> These weren't the boys in the blonde bouffants and the crushed velvet jackets, turning tricks and looking for Mr Right. These were runaways with spider's web tattoos on their cheeks. Run by black pimps with fat bellies and fat gold, they were dumped half-asleep in mini-cabs and sent to distant suburbs to be brutalised by shy deviants. They were danger kids. Straight. Hungry. Desperate. A little more food and warmth and they'd be ready to mug you in your own home. (p. 178; the same scene and characters recur on page 269)

Hugo's depiction of modern-day renters is certainly as caricatured as his old-fashioned idea of them. But the differences between the two kinds – gay, effeminate and seemingly bourgeois-aspirant vis-à-vis straight, hardened and working class – prove less significant than the spatial reversal enacted here. Instead of tricks having to visit Piccadilly to hire rent boys, now the youths must themselves commute out to the suburbs. So it appears that running away to London and going on the game is no longer a means of escaping from suburbia: the job will simply send you straight back.

Hugo's own working experience of prostitution confirms the suburbanization of the profession. His first client – living at Swiss Cottage – is fairly typical: 'womanish'; 'he had a black poodle'; 'They talked. They drank tea.' (p. 206) As Hugo is about to be fellated, he looks down on a familiar feminine, suburban scene: 'Saturday afternoon shopping on the Finchley Road. John Barnes. Toys Toys Toys. Lindy's Patisserie. Respectable Jewish mothers parked their two-door Mercedes and ran into Waitrose.' (p. 207) Admittedly, Hugo's work requires him to visit just as many hotel rooms, which are far preferable, he insists, to homes:

> In hotels, loneliness was horny. It was a no-man's land of no holds barred. Anything could happen, anything could be ordered, anybody could pretend to be anyone. At home there was no escape from the man you were, or weren't. It was written in the curtain fabric, the washing-up, the lilac loo paper, the Panadol in the bathroom cabinet. (pp. 212-3)

Once again, the feminine aspects of the domestic interior are deemed stifling, explicitly asphyxiating masculinity and sexuality. Yet, most of the description of Hugo's experiences with his clients is given over to the depressing, home-based variety. Only the instances in hotels where he is paid *not* to have sex are recounted in any detail, as well as the final,

abortive encounter which ends his career. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Hugo is more interested in these all-too-familiar home and homely environments. Such is the inevitable conclusion of 'the daydream of the schoolboy [...] who wanted to enter the fraternity of hustlers [...] who wanted to be exotic but knew he was suburban' (p. 161).

Earls Court, then London's gay hub, is equally disappointing. Hugo has a preconception that the district represents the quintessence of a sexualized, nocturnal kind of urbanity: 'land of the late-night take away and home of the clone.' But again, Hugo wildly overestimates the sexual glamour waiting to be uncovered in the heart of the city: 'He had always imagined these porn emporia to be seething with young men of every measurement, scantily clad, tongues wagging in each other's throats, a perpetual tableau of sexual spree, snapped by artfully concealed photographers. Instead he was barefoot in suburbia in a draughty studio with a mealy-mouthed clone.' (p. 193) As with Piccadilly, the myth of the alluring sexual metropolis is dispelled and replaced with a dispiriting suburban 'reality'; once again, the search for the city terminates in a vision of gay suburbia. During a soft-porn photo shoot, Hugo realizes that he is being processed to suit the tastes of 'the poodle queens of upmarket bedsit land; the men who went to bed in hairnets and wore chainstore silk dressing gowns; the men who smoked Sobranies and voted Conservative.' This instance of gay domesticity furthermore thinly conceals a wish to return to mother: everything about this 'land' pales in comparison with his mother and her home. She is instinctively liberal, elegant, tasteful and feminine; they, in contrast, exhibit a crass, cheap effeminacy with their hairnets and chainstore dressing gowns; Hugo's home in Hadley is comfortable, not draughty or cramped.

Most of Hugo's sexual adventures are restricted to suburban environments and, moreover, ones within retreating distance of his mother's home. Whereas previously, Hugo's (or rather, David's) traversals of suburbia (between Barnet and Enfield) were an expression of freedom and sexual dynamism, they come to seem to be merely habitual, and like a sluttish Cinderella, his sex-life is circumscribed by the need to catch the last train home to Hadley:

> He had been stopping out with strange men. Strange men he met in pubs where Mrs Shufflewick droned over a dusty handbag and the Trollettes played nudge budge innuendo twice nightly in pink and green sequins. He went home with these men to suburban sitting rooms and quilted bedspreads from Tottenham to Hampstead, from Chalk Farm to Stroud Green. But he could never stay the night. That would be pushing things too far. Already his mother had muttered about the house being his

hotel. He didn't want her to think it had become his left luggage. (p. 179)

The locations of the pubs Hugo visits are not specified, but presumably they are situated somewhere near the suburban areas listed in the above quotation: the men he goes home with would likely live within the catchments of the venues. In any case, the pubs are hardly palatial, nor the patrons princely: the tawdry, repetitive drag routines on offer as entertainment mark the places as being some considerable distance from the centre. But the two ranges given actually demarcate a relatively small area (indeed, Tottenham to Hampstead and Stroud Green to Chalk Farm are almost congruent domains). Furthermore, plotting out all of the sites of Hugo's sexual encounters that take place in London over the course of the whole novel reveals that they mostly take place within a narrow sector of north London suburbia (figure 5.1). The restricted distribution of sexual locations reveals that, unlike the bicycle-powered David/Hugo, whose seemingly limitless horizons were bounded only by how far he could pedal, the adult Hugo's realization of suburbia is far less expansive. Instead, all of the suburban sites Hugo inhabits cluster within the orbit of his mother's seat.

If Hugo is seen to spread his wings and travel to foreign cities, all of his adventures abroad are equally precipitately suburban. Paris shares precisely the same promise as London: 'sex ran in deep seams through its centre, titillating, inviting, provoking, preoccupying.' (p. 164) The nightclubs, however, prove to be as tired and unsexy as the ones back home; the only pleasure Hugo finds lies in the soft furnishings of the apartment of the one man who picks him up (none other than a short, balding, bespectacled professor): 'Hugo felt that rush of comfort, that first ache for the softness of a deep carpet and the sinking of the sofa.' (p. 165) One domain, however, does escape the reductive appellation: America. When watching some 'specialised' porn manufactured in the United States, for instance, Hugo makes the explicit distinction: 'they weren't suburban. They were American.' (p. 187) And it is in New York, 'the charnel house of the Western World' (p. 283), where Hugo would appear to have finally given suburbia the slip. Yet even here Hugo still cannot shake off his origins. His inability to do so renders his existence on these streets of Sodom as transparently inauthentic: one of Hugo's friends, for example, knew him 'for what he was. A sometime hooker, a sometime low-grade porn star, sometime teenage cottage queen with a smart head and a nice suburban home waiting for him anytime if things got too strange.' (p. 297) More significantly, the text strongly suggests that it is in

Figure 5.1 Map of north London indicating (with circles)
the locations of Hugo's sexual encounters

some dank New York sex club that Hugo contracts the HIV virus, and from this point the narrative rapidly concertinas into Hugo's funeral which takes place just down the road from Hadley. It is difficult not to interpret the denouement crudely, as somehow punitive of Hugo's final escape from suburbia. Predictably, his mother dominates the wake and Hugo is seemingly kept company in the afterlife not by fellow Hadley cottagers or AIDS victims, but by the ghosts of elderly suburban women. The most overbearing of these even eerily reminds him of antimacassars (p. 320); fittingly enough, soft furnishings of a bygone age

become Hugo's psychic death shroud. The final insult to Hugo's metropolitan aspirations is his burial in Hendon cemetery. So, far from disordering with his homosexuality the feminine, suburban interiors that he despises, these spaces and places seemingly disrupt Hugo's ideal of an independent homosexual urban underworld. Hugo and *A Matter* realize Sinfield's anxiety about gay men attaching to the heterosexual culture of childhood. The constantly repeated trope of the suburban city reflects the inexorable centrifugal draw on Hugo's sexual imagination of his mother and of the suburban surfaces of Hadley.

Alternative Strategies

A Matter is not alone in scrambling metropolitan and suburban distinctions. Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, published just one year before Moore's novel, presents the city and the suburbs to be unstable categories. Certainly, Kureishi's protagonist Karim Amir is purely contemptuous of the southeast London suburbs of his childhood, deeming them to be crushingly dull and utterly materialistic. Of Orpington, for instance, 'it was said that when people drowned they saw not their lives but their double-glazing flashing before them.'[27] As in *A Matter* the antithesis of suburban inertia is always couched in metropolitan terms. Karim states that 'in my family nervous breakdowns were as exotic as New Orleans' (p. 11) and that 'in London psychologists were saying you had to live your own life in your own way and not according to your family, or you'd go mad.' (p. 62) Both Karim and his father's lover Eva ache for the social (and for Karim, also the sexual) opportunities London seems to behold. Eva in particular aspires to accede to a smarter set: referring to her lover Haroon's unambitious suburban disciples she declares 'my dream is to get him to meet with more responsive people – in London. I'm determined to get us all to London!' (p. 30). Yet having successfully penetrated this world, Eva has to continually disavow her suburban origins in order to convince others, and more importantly herself, of her metropolitan credentials. As Karim observers, Eva worries that the inclusion of too many people from their past life will threaten to discolour the 'brilliant evening' with which she seeks to launch herself on London: 'she didn't want the new smooth crowd to think she was mixing with a bunch of basket-weavers from Bromley.' (p. 133) But like Hugo's admission that he will never escape his suburban origins, Karim realizes that Eva's denial will always be self-defeating: 'I saw that she wanted to scour the suburban stigma right off her body. She

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[27] Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*. (London: Faber, 1990), p. 23. Subsequent page references given in parentheses.

didn't realize it was in the blood and not on the skin; she didn't see there could be nothing more suburban than suburbanites repudiating themselves.' (p. 134)

As in *A Matter*, then, in *Buddha* suburbia is revealed to be inescapable, since the metropolitan heart is equally suburban. Likewise, in Kureishi's novel, the suburbs are demonstrably dynamic in various ways. Whilst Karim despises the suburbs for their drabness, and worse, their sinister emptiness and near-perpetual silence, they are nevertheless distinctly cosmopolitan and exhibit a class composition more varied than anything Eva experiences in London. The Amir's cul-de-sac is a case in point. Karim's family, with his father from a family of Indian doctors and his working-class English mother, is complemented by the following households:

> Mr Whitman, the policeman, and his young wife, Noleen; next door were a retired couple, Mr and Mrs Holub. They were socialists in exile from Czechoslovakia, and unknown to them their son crept out of the house in his pyjamas every Friday and Saturday night to hear uncouth music. Opposite them were another retired couple, a teacher and a wife, the Gothards, An East End family of birdseed dealers, the Lovelaces, were next to them – old Grandma Lovelace was a toilet attendant in the Library Gardens. Further up the street lived a Fleet Street reporter, Mr Noakes, his wife and their overweight kids, with the Scoffields – Mrs Scoffield was an architect – next door to them. (p. 74)

Further, the passage alludes to what is often claimed to be the most significant cultural formation to have emerged from 1970s suburbia – punk music. As Master Holub's nocturnal absconding suggests, punk was produced and consumed in defiance of the conventional family order. In *Buddha*, however, the personal refashioning precipitated by popular music, whether glam or punk rock, prompts the kind of metropolitan aspiration and patent inauthenticity embodied by Eva. Indeed, Eva's son Charlie, Karim's principle love interest, has little feeling for punk beyond where it can take him. After watching their first punk gig together, Karim insists neither he nor Charlie can follow in their footsteps: 'it would be artificial. [...] We're not like them. We don't hate the way they do. We've got no reason to. We're not from the estates.' (p. 132) Undaunted, Charlie abandons Karim and sets 'away to new adventures' (p. 132), which lead him to London and New York.

Also like Moore's novel, *Buddha*, along with Baker's *Tim and Pete*, seeks to conjugate irreligiousness and the sex act in the suburban home. Both of these novels are much clearer, however, about the limits to the subversive possibilities of disrupting domesticity in this manner. The first sexual episode recounted in *Buddha* involves Haroon with Eva in her

Beckenham garden. In an act of quintessentially suburban voyeurism, Karim observes his father's noisy infidelity and wonders 'was I conceived like this [...] in the suburban night air, to the wailing of Christian curses from the mouth of a renegade Muslim masquerading as a Buddhist?' (p. 16). Rather than being disruptively sacrilegious, the suburban sex here is an act of fecund syncretism. Karim's musings on his own origins suggest that, far from being disrupted by the supposedly disturbing properties of hybridity and performativity, suburbia actually *produces* them, seemingly through as natural a process as birth. Karim, who is even-handedly bisexual, without ever using the label, and of mixed-race and cross-class parentage, is then seemingly all the more suburban for being multiply hybrid. The novel opens with a clichéd, proud declaration of identity, which is immediately partly effaced: 'My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost' (p. 1); from the first line onwards, *Buddha* evinces a suspicion of fixed identity categories whilst seeking to inhabit all kinds of in-between-ness. Despite their bleakness and the feeling of being under surveillance that they give residents and visitors, of all places it is the suburbs that facilitate playful performances and multiple permutations of identity that are relatively unencumbered by concerns about authenticity.

In Baker's *Tim and Pete*, the protagonists revisit the ruins of Tim's familial home a while after it has been destroyed by a landslide. The gutted shell of this perfect suburban home, 'our once-sleek Richard Neutra dreamhouse', is reminiscent of a temple once dedicated to the American Dream, now defiled: 'you could see that kids had been coming here to fuck.' The interior even has a desecrated altar: 'in the yellow breakfast nook where my mother had served Aunt Jemima pancakes on sunny mornings in 1959, someone had taken a dump.'[28] Pete and Tim almost can't help but commit one last vengeful profanity themselves. Remembering how as a teenager he was too fearful to ever contemplate bringing somebody home with his father 'Joe McCarthy in the next room', Tim enacts with Pete a sexual scene invoking 'some surly punk from high school who always gave [Tim] a hard time [and who] probably just wanted to do this.' Echoing Hugo's excitement regarding his sitting-room sex, Tim declares that this performance of sexual subversion was 'one of the hottest times we ever had.' (p. 36) However, Pete and Tim's desire to unsettle the suburban sexual status quo always manifest as shock *fantasies*. Both characters balk at the

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[28] Baker, *Tim and Pete*, p. 36.

idea of putting these performances into practice, that is, in having an actual, not merely an imagined, straight audience.

Pete and Tim's squeamishness at the thought of more direct political confrontation is shown to be hypocritical. The novel is emphatically clear as to who is the enemy of gay men in the wake of the AIDS crisis: the homophobic Right, that is, most of the Republican Party, including State politicians and dignitaries who have embarked on statutory or PR campaigns to further penalize and demonize gays, as well as more senior figures who have been in a position to alleviate the plight of AIDS sufferers and combat public ignorance and hostility, but have patently done nothing (e.g. Reagan and Bush, snr.). Baker insists that gays and PWAs should no longer interiorize their pain: for too long gay men have been producing and consuming AIDS narratives that merely demand pity. The only appropriate course of action, then, is to do combat with those who actively fuel homophobia. The novel's setting, in the aftermath of the L.A. riots, is therefore apposite: Pete asks why the blacks of South Central had not 'aimed their rage better' and instead of burning down their own neighbourhood and adjacent Koreatown, they ought to have 'gone after Daryl Gates [or] gone out to the Simi Valley and burned down the courthouse. And the Reagan Library. With the Reagans in it.' (p. 79) Pete's comments encourage a spatialized strategy; they call for an urban battle plan based on neighbourhoods. And more than any other, it is the residential suburb that constitutes enemy territory.

In comparison, a much more militant group of HIV-positive artist activists, who have organized what amounts to a terrorist cell in the suburbs, are shown to have no such qualms. Like the Hadley-based Hugo, the militants are motivated by a desire to queer suburban-domestic space. Their stunts include interrupting family television viewing with transmissions of gay pornography. Most of their energy, though, is focused on the home of the gang's leader Glenn, which, from the outside, appears inconspicuous in a 'tidy and family oriented' neighbourhood, the street scene even replete with that stock marker of stolid suburban affluence and security, the Volvo station wagon, here with a BABY ON BOARD sticker (p. 175). On the inside, however, the place has been gutted; as with the violation of Tim's childhood home, this wrecking marks a vengeful attack on the familial home: it was 'as if a gang of criminals had murdered Chuck and Cindi and the twins and taken over the house, deliberately trashing the discount home furnishings.' (p. 175) Glenn goes further by installing his own aggressively queer sculptural works in the living room, featuring centrally an interactive sexual 'contraption' made out of recycled suburban staples,

including household appliances and toys. Similarly, in their other suburban hideaway, an ex-Boy Scout camp hall, the group's leader has spliced together sexual articles with more familiar equipment in order to disturb the building's more conventional users: '"And here we have our memorabilia." [He] pulled out a large cardboard box filled with an odd mixture of Boy Scout paraphernalia and sex toys - tent stakes and dildos, steel utensil kits and cock rings. "We're going to toss some of this stuff around eventually, casual reminders of a simpler time."' (p. 216)

To a degree, the artists' attempts at sexualizing suburbia are only going to get them so far. Quite simply, the suburbs are already redolent with associations of (hetero)sexual deviancy; evidence of some gay sexual shenanigans will not exactly bring the houses down. Indeed, the protagonists stumble upon a Republican representative, a family values firebrand (who is pushing to rescind all AIDS protection laws), caught *in flagrante delicto* with Pete's mother, but although somewhat hysterically rendered, the scene hardly comes across as surprising. If, however, I am underestimating the anxieties and suspicions around homosexuality and AIDS during the period in which *Tim and Pete* was produced,[29] then the militants discover more profound limitations to their confrontational artistic practices. With the hybrid constructions they have installed in their living room and at the Scout hall they aim to disable the equipment's original function, as tools to indoctrinate individuals, particularly children, into hetero-patriarchy. But it seems these artworks, which remain behind closed doors, unseen by the public, are largely for the artists' own gratification. Glenn suggests that they are 'going to toss some of this stuff around eventually' – but that 'eventually' belies the fact that the material has mere *conceptual* political value only. Hence the artworks' constituent parts have not been transformed; they remain toys, playthings. The political limitations of the gang's artistic endeavours parallel precisely the weakness of the theoretical posturing made in support of the queering of space. Affrica Taylor's analysis of closet space, for instance, constructs the same interior and exterior aspects as the gang's suburban headquarters. Likewise, all the important activity in Taylor's model goes on unseen. Nevertheless, Taylor insists that this private play can be measurably disruptive:

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[29] A later scene suggests that such tactics indeed provoke much stronger reactions in the era of AIDS: one of the activists, Dexter, had received a prison sentence for an earlier stunt in 1982, 'an infamous video art prank in the Bay Area, the Rose Parade signal overridden for a few minutes in several hundred homes' with close up images from a gay porn film. 'By the time the case came to trial the next year,' Dexter explains, 'homo stuff had got a really bad name, people freaked out about AIDS and all that. So they through the book at us.' (p. 245)

When we wilfully play around with them, closets become our performance spaces. As sites of passing for straight, they allow us to be simultaneously (queer) inside and (straight) outside, a highly transgressive double position. The closet then becomes a stage for the (tricky) performance of sexuality. As long as anyone can successfully keep the (known) secret of homosexuality by carrying off the performance of heterosexuality, all heterosexuality can be seen as performance, all heterosexuality becomes open to question, and all spaces become sexually ambiguous.[30]

In order to show that queer strategies are capable of practical effect, Taylor elides two distinct audiences, the queer and the heterosexual. If closets are 'our' performance spaces, 'we' are performing to no-one but 'ourselves'. But if the closet is a 'stage'; presumably some other agency is watching and has been affected by this performance. Indeed, Taylor swiftly moves from the use of the pronouns 'we' and 'our' to the repeated deployment of 'all', thereby suggesting that what was a purely queer epistemology has become global, one accessible by heterosexuals as well. The clause 'all heterosexuality can be seen as performance', suggests that heterosexuality becomes open to question by all, including heterosexuals, but it is not explained exactly how. Furthermore, Taylor implies but at no point makes clear how structures of heterosexuality are brought into question. Heterosexuality may be a performance, but it is reinforced through material, social and economic relations. It is similarly inscribed in social spaces. It simply has not been made clear how the exposure of queerness renders 'all spaces [...] sexually ambiguous'. Indeed, it is unfortunately far easier to imagine situations where a queer individual succeeds only in compromising her personal safety upon revealing her sexuality in an otherwise heterosexual environment.

Glenn's group subsequently progresses to more direct (and violent) methods. This change in tactics rather reflects the shift away from queer strategies in LGBT politics in general; the fusing, destabilization or erasure of heteronormative codes, boundaries and spaces that is typical of queer practice becomes more likely to be seen as a temporary measure only, with at best the power to briefly or intermittently confound, but not to overturn homophobia. In any case, domestic space seems particularly resilient to queer praxis: one observation from *Queers in Space*, an otherwise optimistic anthology exploring space and queer activism, admits that not even a crowd of joyriding ambisexual youths

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[30] Affrica Taylor, 'A Queer Geography', in *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 1997) pp. 3-19 (p. 15).

fucking loudly in a suburban semi 'can tear down the walls'.[31] Furthermore, the potential for shock fades rapidly over time; indeed, 'queer' has been rapidly co-opted, even commodified. For instance, from the same anthology, Jean-Ulrick Désert unintentionally suggests that the most dynamic response to new forms of 'queer' domesticity has been the provision by the housing industry of 'spaces of great permeability and flexibility,' such as loft apartments.[32]

Tim and Pete demonstrates that a more productive way of responding to the suburbs is again to concentrate instead on subcultural investments in, and interpretations of, the landscape. Whilst the activists may be having fun by locating their headquarters in a 'family-oriented neighborhood', Tim is more interested in the way a basketball hoop outside the base evokes a gay porn-film set up, or how the swimming-pool has 'reassuring' 'Hockney resonances' (p. 175). Importantly, these adult gay associations also help fend off the kind of infantilization that besets many of Leavitt's protagonists. For example, when listening to a song based on a 1950s children's book that 'depicted a little boy leading the Robed One by the hand into his suburban home' (p. 126), Tim is flooded with a 'wrenching sense of childhood loneliness' and a series of seemingly unrelated images of childhood that as an adult he inexplicably associates with grieving:

> I don't know what it was really, it wasn't just the song. But I started to cry. It was the mood of the song, I guess, the way it triggered dormant childhood memories, the same way my mother's death had. Images that for no rational reason I associated with grief. The bronzed bell at the elementary school. A papier-mâché pueblo in a fifth-grade classroom. My cowboy outfit. Cap pistols. Cub Scouts. Mom as den mother. (p. 127)

The nostalgic reverie of boyhood projects and games culminates with the maternal near-tautology 'Mom as den mother'. Such memories appear to be a new trajectory in the novel but one that is altogether similar to the relationship with suburbia that the gay characters of David Leavitt's fiction possess: an obsessive desire to reconnect with one's estranged or deceased mother and a guilt-ridden longing to return to a pre-sexual past.

Yet, feelings provoked by thoughts of lost childhood innocence are shown to immediately attach instead to entirely adult associations: 'Jeff. A sense that Jeff hadn't

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[31] David Bell, 'One-handed Geographies: An Archeology of Public Sex', in *Queers in Space: Communities/Public Spaces/Sites of Resistance*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1997) pp. 81-90 (p. 84).

[32] Jean-Ulrick Désert, 'Queer Space', in *Queers in Space*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram et al., pp. 16-26 (p. 22).

done anything, he was innocent and shouldn't have died. Jeff lifting himself out of the swimming pool, the hair on his chest and stomach dripping water, his wet, glossy, pink-lipped grin.' (p. 127) Undoubtedly provoked by the struggles faced by gay communities in the wake of the AIDS epidemic and a state-sponsored backlash, Baker's novel argues emphatically for a more productive refocusing of feelings of grief and loss. The novel ends with Pete and Tim reunited in the latter's Santa Monica Canyon apartment, and with Glenn's gang about to mount their assault on a Republican Party family values conference, with Bush and Reagan in attendance. It is not revealed whether their attack is successful or if the terrorists only make it as far as the conference hall's car-park; any kind of explosive and bloody conclusion would after all be just another cathartic fantasy and render *Tim and Pete* a failure on its own terms. For similar reasons, Baker withholds from describing Tim and Pete's sexual consummation; indeed, it is not entirely clear whether they will resume their relationship. The reader is thus prevented from being satisfied with fantasies of retribution, or indeed a conventional romantic conclusion, and is instead encouraged to consider what constitutes an appropriate course of action to better bring about political and cultural change. Unlike Leavitt's or Moore's fiction, then, *Tim and Pete* demonstrates both an awareness of the ways in which visions of suburbia can draw gay men into nostalgic impotence, and a realization that attempts to subvert familial domesticity are limited. The novel suggests that a more fruitful way of interacting with 'the straightest space imaginable' is to broaden and strengthen gay subcultures by drawing upon the numerous and diverse gay experiences, histories and readings of suburbia.

Conclusion
Writing 'Home'

I began this thesis with a discussion of how gay subcultures in the UK and the US are closely associated with urban centres and, also, that specifically homosexual or gay identities have long been predicated on the existence of sexually dissident subcultures within large cities. Historically, textual representations of same-sex desire have reflected and reproduced this metropolitan orientation: numerous texts written in the twentieth century that centrally feature homosexual characters are urban located; many, indeed, refer to the city in their very title. Since the emergence in the 1980s of a substantial identifiably 'gay' literary and filmic subculture, however, this focus has broadened considerably. It is perhaps telling that a reworking of the title of Armistead Maupin's series of novels set in San Francisco would provide an apposite alternative title to this thesis: 'Tales of the Suburbs' expresses rather well gay narrative's shift of emphasis away from the city. The pluralities implied by such a title would be welcome; as I have shown, gays have had a variety of reasons for producing stories set in suburbia. Certainly, gay suburban narratives do not simply reflect a reversal of the 'Great Gay Migration' from non-metropolitan to urban areas and, more specifically, a trend of increasing gay suburban habitation (though I do not dispute that such a demographic shift is currently taking place in the US and the UK).

The expression 'Homecoming Queens', though, relates more effectively the complexities of gay cultural producers' preoccupation with the suburbs. Firstly, and foremost, my chosen title articulates the return structure that is characteristic of so many gay suburban narratives. This structure is not just apparent at a representational level. The fictions examined in Part II explicitly present adult gay men revisiting the suburban environments of their childhoods. But as the various texts considered in Part I have shown, even if such stories ultimately conclude with a departure for the city, narrating homosexual adolescence inevitably enacts a return to the suburbs. Indeed, often the primary motivation of these stories is to recapture some element of the pre-gay suburban past that has been obscured by the gay urban present: it is no accident that the title also alludes to the possibility of suburban effeminacy, which many of the coming-out stories examined in chapter one seek to reclaim and celebrate. (In any case, the original meaning of the title is already loaded with a contrary sense of departure and return; the conventional denotation of

'homecoming queen' is the role played by a female senior high-school or University student (or young townswoman) during a local celebration which both honours the return of alumni (or former residents) and the imminent graduation of current students (or the coming of age of the locality's young people).)

Secondly, as I suggested in the introduction, 'homecoming' is a common trope in gay narrative for arrival in the city. My use of the term, therefore, further manipulates what is already a subcultural appropriation. In so doing, however, I do not presume that the referents of 'home' have been simply relocated for a second time; what once expressed a return to a non-metropolitan domestic environment and then a distinctly urban homosexual milieu has not, crisply and cleanly, reverted back to a suburban setting. It is rather more likely that the continued mobility of 'home', as it is articulated in gay subcultural narratives, has rendered its meaning fluid and ambiguous, literally 'unhoused' (a sense most apparent in the fiction of Leavitt). Thus, 'home' and the associations of 'suburbia' provide no secure and stable site in gay narrative. Probably, this lack of definition is an inevitable consequence of the continual emergence of gay subculture out of mainstream society. Moreover, it demonstrates that gay subculture is far from monolithic; the absence of a sure sense of home means that gay subculture is unclear of its own positioning in relation to mainstream society, and hence is continually open to revision and contestation.

Lastly, 'Homecoming Queens' can be understood as referring to a strategy of disrupting the symbolism of suburbia, and by extension, mainstream heterosexuality. If the traditional associations of homecoming queens conjure suburban pageantry and pride and, moreover, the canonization of heterosexuality – homecoming queens are, after all, often paired with kings – then tainting the term with homosexuality is akin to gatecrashing the suburban party. Yet, as I demonstrated in chapter five, such aggressive symbolic subversion usually amounts to little. These strategies are defused by a combination of the lure of the comforting – but, crucially, desexualized – suburban pasts of some gay men, and the resilience of suburbia to such attacks, which, to a considerable extent, stems from the suburbs' already entrenched reputation for sexual deviance.

This thesis has demonstrated that strategies deployed by gay texts for narrating suburbs, from Los Angeles to High Barnet, are numerous and diverse. Some of these narratives still show suburbia to be a byword for homophobia while others seem consumed by nostalgic impotence; however, many more interpret the suburbs in nuanced and productive ways. What characterizes these more optimistic approaches is a strong sense that the suburbs are

potentially transparent, blank or open, rendering visible and readable the opportunities gay men have made there, or making more vivid and accessible memories that help to strengthen gay subcultures. Such a conceptualization distinguishes gay suburban narratives from more mainstream interpretations, which typically inscribe the suburbs as places where secrets are hidden by ubiquitous surfaces. Furthermore, their desire to recuperate or celebrate homosexual suburban experience distances these stories from recent theoretical developments in the area of sexual geography, which prioritize the 'queering' or destabilizing of 'straight' space. Hence the most constructive gay suburban narratives have rather less to do with heterosexuality than might first appear. By contrast, such narratives are more preoccupied with complicating and broadening understandings of gay identity and subculture.

Appendix

Interview with Dennis Cooper, Los Feliz, CA, 11 April 2005

Martin Dines: Your novels tend to focus on Angelean suburbs. Is that because these places just happen to be the typical habitat of the teenage boys that populate your novels, or is there something particularly interesting and productive about these landscapes?

Dennis Cooper: Well, it is where people live; it's where I lived, where I grew up. So, there's that. And you know the way L.A. is constructed: I mean, this [Los Feliz] is a suburb too, so it's just whether you're over in the Valley or over here. The physical make-up of Los Angeles is really key to the way my work is structured and the way the narrative works. So, it's happenstance and it's because I know it, but it's also because I thought it would be an interesting way to change the way plot and narrative worked, to base it on the way things begin and end, in terms of journeys, in terms of, well a lot of different things here. It was part of my process in doing those books, the George Miles cycle, was to actually study that, and try and make up...

MD: I see. Because the conventional narrative trajectory for disaffected or troubled youth is to escape the small town or the suburbs and get the city as soon as possible. But that kind of escape route doesn't even appear to exist in any of your work at all. Why do you think that is? You talked about the way you're changing narrative structures...

DC: Well, it doesn't exist because there's no reason for it to exist if you live in Los Angeles anyway, so there's that. Everything's like driving in half an hour and you're, you know...

MD: If you do indeed drive...

DC: If you drive, but everyone drives. I mean, I do know some people who take the bus, but that's a whole other narrative that I don't even understand, I've never done that, so... I don't know, just the idea that you'd have to have that much drama is not interesting to me. I don't like to have to have that decision making and drama that comes with that kind of change.

MD: Would it be too close a coming-out type narrative?

DC: Yeah, I was trying to avoid that for sure, although I wasn't really that very familiar with it when I was working on this when I was younger, with the coming-out novel, because there wasn't really probably any examples of that back then. I was just trying to avoid all that kind of stuff. I mean it does happen in *Frisk*, there's a big shift that way in *Frisk*; that's the only book where there's a big shift like that, and there's a reason why I put that in the book. I didn't want to pollute the work with tropes; I was just trying to get around that as much as possible. And the drift or something – there's this kind of drive, but it's also a drift – was really important to the way the work works. It just didn't seem interesting to me, it just seemed it would be a distraction, a kind of fakeness, or something. You know, it's a kind of like a nonsense, the whole coming-out narrative thing.

MD: Your work, perhaps rather obviously, contrasts with writers such as John Rechy, and Bruce Benderson, who are both very much preoccupied with sexual outlaw characters, and they've labeled themselves 'outlaw' writers. Rechy even talks of an outlaw 'sensibility', or aesthetic. They're very strongly attached to urban territories, and it's not just a New York thing, with Benderson's Times Square, which he seeks to defend: Rechy very much an Angelean writer, obviously. What do you make of that kind of approach, that sense of territory?

DC: Well, it's really different in each of those writers. Bruce is interested in there being a determined sociological meaning going on there and class; he's interested in issues of class, which are not really issues to me, and seem like things I want to avoid. Rechy's just coming from a whole different tradition of writer: his writing has more of a relationship to pulp narrative, and if you're talking about the early work…

MD: Like *Sexual Outlaw* and…

DC: Yeah, and *City of Night* and all that stuff, it's really a doctored autobiography. When I was a teenager I used to see Rechy hustling on the street; you know, I mean he really did that, and I'm certainly not interested in working strictly with autobiography. For him really

that is his thing, but also he's kind of in love with the kind of conventional narrative structure, and when he fucks with it, it's in a very modernist way, but I don't have any interest in that at all.

MD: Is it too conventional?

DC: Oh yeah, yeah, way too conventional for me. I mean, nothing against Rechy, it just isn't my thing. I'm just coming out of a European or French tradition.

MD: It's interesting that both of them cite Genet as influences, indeed Benderson sees a thread running through the two earlier writers and himself.

DC: Between Rechy and...?

MD: Rechy and Genet before him.

DC: Oh yeah. Yeah. I don't have any relationship with Rechy at all, much to his anger. [Laughs] He lives half a block from me.

MD: Really? OK. Too close for comfort?

DC: He's not happy that I'm not influenced by him at all, and doesn't *believe* it in fact, whether in fact I never... I didn't even read him till I was in college. But of course Genet was important to me, but I had all these problems with Genet, so, I was trying to avoid what Genet was doing. As great as he is, I saw problems in the work, and I was trying to remove those problems from my work.

MD: It's interesting what you've just said earlier about Benderson being more pre-occupied with class because at any turn possible he's rabidly anti-suburban. Perhaps that's just a middle-class sensibility that he's railing against.

DC: Yeah. That's right. Yeah. Well, his whole writing about hustlers and all that, he has a very specific relationship to it. I have a relationship to that whole world too, but his is very,

like, Times Square, and he's very interested... My work is very cleansed of issues like class and race and all that; those things are brought in very carefully because I don't want to deal with them; they're brought to make points, but he's in very interested in those kind of differences.

MD: If you're not really a traditional outlaw writer, how are we to respond to Bret Easton Ellis's epithet that's still used to publicize your work that you're 'the last literary outlaw in mainstream fiction'?

DC: Oh, I really like Bret's work.

MD: But that epithet?

DC: Oh I don't know, that stuff... That's so not my interest or my decisions or anything. That's just stuff I have to let... I have to trust my people, my agent and my publisher, that they know what they're doing... It's just marketing: for some reason there's some benefit in being the new Burroughs, or being the outlaw, the most dangerous writer in America; I have no relationship to that stuff at all. It's just... you know... a way to single me out or something or to create some kind of distinct impression of what I do. I mean, I can understand it: my work is definitely on the outside, and it's definitely greatly disliked, and I suppose it is kind of outlaw in that sense; it doesn't fall into any kind of American tradition of writing, to me it [i.e., his books' marketing] just doesn't have any interest at all.

MD: It did strike me as rather a mis-selling, but it's also a funny oxymoron: you're outlaw and mainstream. But I wonder if that 'mainstream' is also misplaced. It seems there's nothing more mainstream, after all, than suburbia.

DC: Yeah, but there's nothing less mainstream than writing explicitly about sex and violence though. That just takes it completely outside. There's a big difference between what I do than what Bret does, in that sense: I really, really want the confrontation, I really, really want to not disempower those things, I want them to have their full, complete power. I'm completely willing to become powerless in their power and stuff, like, in order to get things across. I mean that's really not suburb... Bret's work is obviously fiction but he's

more interested in playing with stereotypes and the real way that suburban life is. Mine is more like a sort of hallucinated, private vision within suburb… of what growing up in the suburbs does to your imagination, that's really what interests me.

MD: I want to come to that in a moment actually, particularly with regards to *Try*. Another thing that I've heard you're quite uncomfortable with, is the way many people have responded to the spate of high-school shooting narratives, whether film or fiction, as a kind of diagnosis of the state of the nation, the heartland as dark heart. Why are you so uncomfortable with these kind of readings, with regards to your last published novel?

DC: You mean *My Loose Thread*? Yeah, that was a reaction against that. Well, just because of the obvious… that take on it is just grossly generalizing, disrespectful and has no interest in the emotional truth. You know, I'm an anarchist, and that's my philosophy, and that's my politics, and that's very important to me and always has been, and I don't believe in any collective identity on any level like that really. Plus, I did my research on it, because originally I was going to write a non-fiction book about it. I did my research and the fact is that every single one of those situations was completely different – they were just lumping it all together under these rubrics, of what, bullying and video games and blah blah blah blah blah and all that stuff. And it's not the truth; the truth is that these are individual kids with individual problems and their problems are completely incomprehensible to everyone including the parents and friends and psychologists, and that's the truth. There's no answer to this thing, and it's best you just try and get as close to an individual as possible, pay as respectful attention to them, and it becomes one incident; it isn't supposed to be about any other incident but that incident and then you have an experience of what they're experiencing and that's the best you can do. But to, sort of, you know… I just don't buy it. Of course, there's basic truths in all that, but to exclude the personal and to exclude the individual stuff it just creates a false interpretation; I resisted it. The whole phenomenon, the way the legal system responded to it was just so infuriating. You know, I'm a big champion of young people anyway, I want to show respect to young people anyway. That was such an example of why I [inaudible].

MD: Let's move on to *Try*. I'm aware that you based the protagonist of *Try*, Ziggy McCauley, on someone you knew or someone you know, but his unconventional name,

particularly for British readers I think, inescapably evokes Ziggy Stardust, David Bowie, and teenage daydreams of suburban escape. Given that he seems to have no inclination of leaving the San Gabriel Valley – he even avoids doing so at one point – to what extent did you figure the choice of Ziggy's name to be ironic?

DC: I of course did think about that. It was his real name, and it was in fact based on a comic called Ziggy, it's not based on Ziggy Stardust, although obviously that was… I liked the problem of that, I liked the suggestion. I always like that; I like to complicate things. In the structure of that book it creates a relationship between him and Robin, the Robin character. My novels are really carefully organized and structured; that's the way I work. So the name 'Ziggy' is his name, but it also creates a formal relationship between his rock critic father and the heavy-metal-obsessed Robin. There's a lot going on there, but… I could have done something to mention it had something to do with Bowie but I though I'd get around it and see what happened.

MD: Like many of your characters, Ziggy is an enthusiastic producer of zines. Do you see the kind of environment Ziggy comes from as a particularly creative place?

DC: You mean like living out in the San Fernando Valley and all that? In that case he's just like all my other characters, he's just like me. Being an artist, it's a way to fight what's around you. That's why there's a lot of artists who are from the suburbs. His zine was also a confessional, you know, trying to deal with his own abuse. And like all my books they sort of deal with what was going on at the time, at that was at the time of all queer zines and all that. I guess that's not an interesting answer: yeah, I guess so!

MD: You've said before you don't particularly like to do readings because they give your characters voices they don't have, or perhaps fixes them in ways you're uncomfortable with. One of the things I most like about *Try* is Ziggy's speech: it seems – succinctly inarticulate – he's very economical about avoiding clarity. It's sometimes because he's not sure about things, but it often seems to be a strategy of avoiding his expressions and thoughts being pinned down. Did you mean to try to grant Ziggy a kind of autonomy within the text?

DC: Sure. That's sort of true in all my books. He's an extreme example of it. I mean, I wanted to do one character who was the main voice in the novel. And that's the way I talk too, which is probably becoming apparent to you. But you mean give him autonomy in relation to the rest of the characters in the book?

MD: Sometimes, yes indeed, but also within the text – it's quite a complicated relationship between writer, reader and text...

DC: Yeah. Yeah. You see, I'll have to think about that book... really carefully. It's really involved in all these systems I created, and that's why it's hard for me – I don't have it at the tips of my fingers as I did when I wrote it. It was very much about the first person and how the first person works, and... you know, how that makes you close and how it also puts you really far away from them. He was set up in relation to the other voices, that kind of fake rock critic, the overly erudite, slightly awkward, slightly pretentious voice. And then the kind of conventional voice of the Uncle Ken sections. And then Calhoun the junkie – that was also based on a real person – and the way that kind of screwed up heroin thinking goes on. I dunno, it's like architecture to me, it's like mixing a song or something. There's a relation to him and Hüsker Dü. There's a relationship between the way he speaks and the band, in the same way the Uncle Ken sections have a relationship to Slayer – and that contrast there...

MD: Yeah, Ziggy talks of Hüsker Dü sort of creating a space for him, as opposed to a lot of other bands that the other kids are listening to. But it also seems to me that you've achieved something similar with Ziggy's environment: you mentioned the architecture of the text, but the absence of any description of the suburban environment – or when there is it's all blurry and indistinct. Was it your intention to make these spaces more expansive, easier to imagine even?

DC: Yeah, yeah of course. I mean, description is like one of those tropes that I think is nonsense. That probably has to do with the issue of reading aloud. The books are written to be read and that's the way they work, and reading them aloud is like doing an advertisement for them – that's basically all it is. The only way my work works is with a certain kind of deep insinuation. It's part of my plan and all that. I'm very interested in the

idea that the reader is constructing the characters and the world and everything in their head – and again this is an anarchist thing – there's a power balance there that's very important to me, and it's about creating certain kinds of paradigms, and also for the reader to take responsibility as well. I see this more deeply private relationship than between the reader and the text; it's a way of creating a seduction. It's based on techniques of hypnosis, the way I work – I use that a lot. And the way music works, because music is the only kind of art form that does that, where you have the... I'm just really interested in the way a book is the only art form that's entirely private. If you listen to a song it's in the air, and other people hear it. When you read the book there's nothing there; it's just material and then it only exists in your head. So, I'm always working with that. To me, part of thinking about it that way, you have to be really careful with description, and it's more interested in creating a trigger, or about creating triggers, something that would make the drug work. I've always tried to be really cautious about that. I don't want there to be a way to escape. I think if you put too much description in it, it gives the reader an opportunity to reject the text. I mean people do that anyway. I'm not sure that's even what you asked.

MD: Well we've moved on. That was very interesting, that's great.

DC: Sorry! I have this particular weird thing about my work, and I'm also pretty inarticulate, so sometimes interviews are a little weird. So, anyway, sorry.

MD: That's fine! Your adult characters seem to follow more conventional roles – you've got Brice and Roger in *Try*, for example – is that your contribution to the gay marriage debate? Or is it just that you're so disappointed with what adulthood can do to you?

DC: It's a lot of things. Yeah, you know, it's a different world now than really when was when I wrote that book, because, now, the whole gay marriage thing feels very different to me right now, because now it's an issue of rights and it's a different thing. Yeah, there was a was a bit of joke attack on gay couples modeling themselves on heterosexual relationships, and not taking advantage of being gay and leading an unplanned and adventurous life, which is what ideally I think we should all do.

MD: That's interesting – so how was it different back in the early-mid 1990s? Were the arguments around gay marriage less theoretical?

DC: Well at that point it was a symbolic thing to do. There was not even an issue that it would be legalized, there was not even a thought that it would be legalized. Now when people get married [inaudible] and also because those rights are important, and people want them. I've personally changed, because my boyfriend is a Russian citizen and I've been having the most god-awful time getting him a visa to come over here, and if I, of course, get married... So really on a personal level it's changed my thinking about it. Now it's different, it's like part of the revolution, becoming married right now is a way to, you know... You know, right now when gays haven't been doing shit, haven't been doing anything but buying things and going to the gym for the last fifteen years, you now, you take what you can get: there's finally some issue that they're willing to do something about that isn't about doing Tina and going to the gym, I'm very happy to see anything happen. Back then, to adopt: I had friends who were doing it and stuff, and I didn't understand why in the world they were doing that, it just seemed really anti-revolutionary and reactionary. So, there's that. Also, there's the whole gay thing. I write about this stuff because I know it, I have to do that to give my work an honesty and purity. In that book and the George Miles cycle, I had to do that, it was the only way write about that material. As I've said before I have issues with gay identity and the whole idea of it. I think gay men can be awful, I really do. I guess that's a long answer. It's a disappointment with what being gay means now, and what's happened about it; it's a very deep disappointment to me. And that book was written at a moment when... there was this moment when I first started working on those books, when there was an involvement in the gay community with culture and literature and the arts, much more than there is now, it was the end of this kind of old-school thing, which Edmund White came out of, all that stuff, you know that kind of we're all so erudite and gay and we go the opera and stuff. And it was the end of that, and now that's really dead. And it was the beginning of a turn to a kind of consumerism and hedonism, which is basically what gay stuff is all about right now. In a general kind of consensus way. It bothers me. I'm very very interested in sex, obviously, but I also find what can happen, and what desire can be used very scary, and you have to really think about it. See, for me, this kind of lusting after the cute boy thing is really ugly to me in a way. And when it's undifferentiated like that it's just like, you know... Because I like young people so much,

and because I have so many young friends and I've always been very protective of young people and my world's full of young people. I know what that does to those kids, to have people do that to them, I just can't stand it, I really, really just hate it. And so, that's really wrapped up in that work, is just my intense dislike of what an adult gay male means; it doesn't mean what I think it should mean.

MD: This is a little off the point: some people have baulked at your work because it seems your more interested in processes of abusive relationships, the psychology of it, rather than explicitly defending the individual youngster.

DC: Yeah I know, but come on. Yeah, I know. But I'm not a philosopher, I may be intelligent but I'm not like... I'm an anarchist, I don't think that way. I don't have answers, I'm not interested in doing agitprop. I really think I give that stuff real force, and let it have a full eroticism that it has, for people who are attracted to that. And I'm not physically personally attracted to it, but my imagination is very attracted to it, I understand the attraction of that. That stuff's been dealt with forever and either it becomes a psychological portrait, or it becomes like a horror movie, and you never, never get to the bottom of it. And I don't think I've gotten the bottom of it either, but I think if you're going to understand something, you have to let it overwhelm you, you have to overpowered by it. To me it's so obvious, unless you think I'm some kind of monster or something, people think I'm some sort of rampaging paedophile or rapist or murderer or something; which is so absurd. I mean it's obvious that I think that stuff's not good. I mean it's erotic, but it's undercutting eroticism all the time, it's not supposed intended to produce, it's not built in such a way that it would lead to an orgasm. It's creates eroticism and then undercuts it and undercuts it. It's terrible, I think the feeling it produces is maybe a kind of turn on, but it's also awful and doesn't give you any resolution.

MD: Hence five novels about the same subject.

DC: Right!

MD: Just one last question on the suburbs. Where would you feel more at home: in a tract house in the San Fernando Valley, or in a gay bar in West Hollywood?

DC: Is that my only choice? They're the only two options?

MD: Afraid so. And not just for one evening.

DC: Well, I guess I'd choose the tract house. I mean, Jesus, I don't even drink. [laughs] What am I going to do in a gay bar? I'm sorry they're the only two choices. But you know, I'm an artist; any artist would choose the tract house. If you're in West Hollywood you're not going to be an artist, you're going to be hanging around bars. There aren't a lot of artists hanging out down there. So, it's really not that hard a question.

MD: [laughs]

DC: You won't give me Paris as another option?

MD: Sorry.

DC: Well, OK.

MD: Maybe in the projects – no, not even there.

DC: [laughs] I'll take the projects in Paris.

MD: Thanks for your time, Dennis.

DC: Thanks.

Correspondence with Kevin Killian

Responses to questions received by email (20 September 2005)

My questions in italics.

'New Narrative' is usually considered a distinctly urban literary movement, presumably because its practitioners are all based in large North American cities. Most, however, arrived in the likes of San Francisco or New York City after leaving their provincial or suburban hometowns. Would it be right to consider you distinct amongst writers associated with New Narrative as a result of the interest you take in your own Long Island origins? Are the suburban settings of books like Shy *and* Bedrooms Have Windows *unique amongst New Narrative writing (bar some of Dennis Cooper's novels)?*

Martin, I'm not sure how to respond to this. I think of all of us as having suburban origins, except Kathy (Acker) of course, who flaunted her New York-ness. I think it was Carla Harryman who located the origins of the New Narrative writer in Balzac, well any of his novels about the young man (or woman) from the provinces, let's take Lucien de Rubempre from *Lost Illusions* to be our example. The paradox was that Balzac perfected the bourgeois novel—at least Barthes told us so in *S/Z*—and yet we wanted nevertheless to destroy that form, even while living out the lives of so many Lucien de Rubempres in the big city. Thus a book like David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives* is just as redolent of suburban life as it is of urban angst.

Edmund White wrote that 'being gay is a bit like being a writer', in that both gays and writers are likely to be urban, drawn to the city where they are better able to 'seek out those of fellow feeling'. Do you think a close or interesting relationship between metropolitan living and sexually dissident writing still operates or is White rather describing a particular historical moment or, even, a phase of life?

Maybe White was reacting against a previous era of gay culture which seemed contingent on the pastoral, so you'd have to be frolicking in the swimming hole to be gay, living wild like Walt Whitman, Edward Carpenter, you know how E. M. Forster is always on about this. IMHO Ed W. is here swinging too far to the opposite pendulum.

I wrote my novel *Arctic Summer* with strange looking map outlines locating the book in different areas of the city, country, suburb. I wanted it to move architectronically between town and country, and gradually to locate itself in the suburbs. The book (if you've read it) is set in 1952 and little by little re-locates the 'center' of gayness from Frank O'Hara's Museum of Modern Art in New York to way the fuck out into Black Mountain College. (Ridiculously I hoped also to trace, allegorically, the progress of the avant-garde from modernism to post-modernism, the latter of which, as I see it, is a suburban mode). This was an elaboration of the method of *Shy* which begins with a long tedious train journey transporting the hero and heroine from the inner city all the way to Smithtown, the epitome of 'suburban.' But both these plans are as reductive in their own way (reductive as history) as anything I was trying to re-imagine.

Several New Narrative writers and critics have contrasted their work with a gay 'mainstream'. What particular or types of texts represent this literary mainstream?

This list changes from decade to decade, even year to year (and even, if truth be told, to my mood whenever I contemplate this). A dozen years ago I wrote a story which was never published which was a satire on the gay literary establishment. It was turned down twice by horrified editors. I'll send it to you. As a piece of writing it's pretty lame, as sature somewhat prescient since at least three of the books that I predicted actually have come to pass! It's called, 'Dear Fellow Gay Males'. However, say I'm feeling slighted or whatever, the parameters change again.

New Narrative writers have responded differently to commercial gay urban subculture, either derisively (Cooper), expressing alienation (Wojnarowicz) or else insisting that there is an obligation to engage with it, as there has historically been little else outside commodified forms of interaction (Glück and Boone). Do you feel any compulsion to respond to the most visible elements of gay culture?

Well, Martin, I guess I have a weakness for it, since as it happens I'm writing an adoring book (no, actually *two adoring books*) about Kylie Minogue, and I guess part of the reason I have been writing about her for the past 7 years is her absolute location in the center of what you call 'commercial gay urban subculture.' Maybe it's a retrograde movement on my

part, or maybe it's a camp gesture I guess. When I started writing about her I knew very few people in the US who had even heard of her (apart from vague memories of The Locomotion, which had been a hit on MTV back in 1987); invariably these were gay men of a certain age, all of whom loved her, loved her, loved her. At first I thought your question was about my response to the "most *risible* elements of gay culture" and I guess the same answers apply.

Bedrooms Have Windows *opens by lauding the inspiration and excitement to be found continually on the streets of New York City. But it also suggests that Long Island suburbia is far from simply being the creative desert of 'manicured lawns' and 'country club airs' one might expect. Do you see Kevin and George's inspiration and prolific output to be in spite of the suburban setting, or is there something intrinsic to places like Long Island that is interesting and rewarding?*

Although I knock it, and I feel that I had to get out of Smithtown myself, it is indeed its own culture, and it's not altogether a sterile one so far as the arts go or even politically. The suburbs have their own poetry, even the dire fantasies of Updike and Cheever reveal this daily. Have you seen Bret Easton Ellis' new novel--Lunar Park, sort of a modern update of Cheever's Bullet Park. In the suburbs will be born both the new Messiah and the anti-Christ. It is a place of perversion, the 'Gothic home' envisioned by Mark Seltzer in his marvelous work of visual criticism he calls Serial Killers--the 'Gothic home', where there are bodies literally under the floorboards and behind the walls. I wish I knew more about the UK, but the story that fascinated me, and Dennis too IIRC, is the one of Joe Orton getting busted for inserting the rude photos into the library books of his local branch. Have you seen the new US TV "drama" called Desperate Housewives? I don't even like to watch it, amusing as it is. It hits too close to home to me--still. Rewarding? The jury is out. Interesting? Yes, yes, yes. I don't know how much of my work you've read, Martin, but if you haven't seen my story 'Santa' (published as its own little book by a US poetry press, then collected in my book Little Men) it strikes me as very much about the pretty poison of suburbia and also, I think, its fecundity as a site of production.

Bedrooms Have Windows *seems to mimic the structure of the conventional American coming-out novel, which is typically comprised of a sequence of sexual and emotional*

episodes from the protagonist's suburban boyhood and adolescence, followed by an 'urban epilogue' which adumbrates his successful attainment of gay identity. Your book rather seems to replace this gay trajectory with the story 'how I became a writer.' To what extent was this similarity purposeful, and what are your feelings about the conventional coming-out narrative, which still appears to be very much with us?

One book meaningful to me when I was young – well, really it's two – Emlyn Williams' *George* and its successor *Emlyn* – focus very much on 'how I became a writer.' I think this was a useful model for me. Williams' case is funny because, in the long run, he decides he's not gay, and his going back into the closet is the big emotional push of the narrative. Sometimes, in despair, I think of those two books (and his 'novelistic' account of the Moors Murders, *Beyond Belief* – which I deconstruct in my story 'Philosophy', published in *Little Men*) – when I think of his books I sometimes sigh and imagine he's anticipated me in every one of my formal innovations, not to mention my emotional ones. But that's all right, I do not mind equating myself with a hack.

The conventional coming out narrative? Last week we were staying with the novelist Matthew Stadler, who contributed to an anthology years ago called *Boys Like Us,* in which twenty well known gay male writers wrote out their own coming out story. It was an absurd book in a way, one I scoffed at when it was first published (possibly because I had not been asked to participate). Last week I read the book for the first time and was surprised to find how much of it was illuminating (and how much of it was sexy too, gave me a tingle it did). Still retardataire? Don't know. I guess I'm not that far out of the mainstream myself, though I will argue that for my dear fellow gay male authors I continue to experience powerful feelings of *solidarity,* that's a very different emotion than *respect.*

Why do you think New Narrative writers tend to be so interested in adolescence and youthful protagonists?

I once thought that perhaps the sheer, savage *seethe* of the emotions of these boys and girls would perhaps help the reader find some emotional ground to hold onto while being propelled nearly unwillingly through the intricacies of formal experiment. It's common sense that you have to give your reader something while you're kicking his ass up and into

a higher or more diffuse aesthetic field. However lately I have been rethinking this position, although I don't have a cogent one to substitute for it yet.

Martin dear, sorry to have taken so long to get back to you with my answers to your questions – and I apologize again if my answers seem woolly. I've had so many deadlines lately I'm dizzy with them, and also putting on my new play has ben rather a drain, though all went all right on the night, but I'm back now, so if you need any clarification let me know, or indeed if you have a new set of questions I'll be happy to try to help you out. Shit! I realize now I've spared you from a lengthy exegesis on the city-suburb divisions of the novel I've been writing since 1990, *Spread Eagle.* but I was thinking about it all the way from on the plane. Thanks for giving me this occasion. Yours, Kevin K.

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Bend it Like Beckham, dir. Gurinder Chadha, Fox Searchlight, 2002

Blue Velvet, dir. David Lynch, De Laurentiis, 1986

Donnie Darko, dir. Richard Kelly, Newmarket, 2001

Dottie Gets Spanked, dir. Todd Haynes, Zeitgeist, 1993

Edge of Seventeen, dir. David Moreton, Blue Streak, 1998

Elephant, dir. Gus Van Sant, HBO Films, 2003

Far from Heaven, dir. Todd Haynes, Focus, 2002

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Get Real, dir. Simon Shore, Paramount, 1998

The Good Life, BBC, 1975-8

Head On, dir. Ana Kokkinos, Strand, 1997

The Ice Storm, dir. Ang Lee, Fox Searchlight, 1997

Leave It to Beaver, CBS, 1957-8; ABC, 1958-63

L.I.E., dir. Michael Cuesta, Lot 47, 2001

Married ... with Children, Fox, 1987-97

Metrosexuality, Channel 4, 2001

Normal, Ohio, Fox, 2000

Philadelphia, dir. Jonathan Demme, TriStar, 1993

Pleasantville, dir. Gary Ross, New Line, 1998

Queer as Folk, Channel 4, 1998

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Roseanne, ABC, 1988-97

Six Feet Under, HBO, 2001-05

The Truman Show, dir. Peter Weir, Paramount, 1998

Vera Drake, dir. Mike Leigh, Thin Man, 2004

The Virgin Suicides, dir. Sofia Coppola, Paramount, 1999

Will and Grace, NBC, 1998-2006

MARTIN DINES

SACRILEGE IN THE SITTING ROOM: CONTESTING SUBURBAN DOMESTICITY IN CONTEMPORARY GAY LITERATURE

MARTIN DINES IS A PHD
STUDENT AT KINGSTON
UNIVERSITY (UK). HIS
RESEARCH EXAMINES
SUBURBAN NARRATIVES IN
CONTEMPORARY BRITISH
AND AMERICAN GAY FILM
AND FICTION.

This article explores the significance of the recent proliferation in the anglophone West of gay narratives with suburban-domestic locations. It will be argued that instead of being a place that is swiftly abandoned but forever denigrated, suburbia has, in these stories, come to constitute a site where sexual dissidents can negotiate and contest their involvement with mainstream society. The article examines several texts with suburban settings, paying particularly close attention to Oscar Moore's *A Matter of Life and Sex* (1991). It will be shown that many of these

novels engage with suburban space by utilizing a distinct strategy: the symbolic implantation of homosexuality into the suburban domestic interior, with the aim of destabilizing heterosexual familial order. However, such tactics fail to disrupt straight space either because these texts are themselves so strongly attracted and attached to domestic environments, or because symbolic subversion is itself little able to alter social relations that enjoy substantial material and political support. James Robert Baker's novel *Tim and Pete* (1993) instead suggests an alternative, more productive response to suburbia: the recovery and recuperation of specifically gay imaginary investments in the suburbs.

THE STRAIGHTEST SPACE IMAGINAGABLE?

> Suburbia is seemingly the last place in which gay and lesbian people would actively choose to live. Typically organized around the heterosexual family home, suburbs appear to be the straightest spaces imaginable in the anglophone West. Andy Medhurst's excoriating summation is typical of the view that homosexuality and suburbia are antithetical:

It is perhaps sexual dissidents who are the most rigorously 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 [...] Every sociological study of the suburbs, every media text depicting them, unerringly concurs on this point, so it's little surprise that suburban homosexuals either flee such smothering familialism for the centres of cities [...] or keep fearfully quiet about their sexual lives (Medhurst 1997: 266).[1]

Other commentators from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, geography, architecture, and literary history, emphasize the centrality of the city in the gay imaginary (e.g. Aldrich 2004; Bech 1997; Betsky 1997). Suburbia, as many of these writers would have it, is just a place that gay and lesbian people must leave behind, in order that their real lives may begin in the liberated and libidinous metropolis.

But the supposed mutual exclusivity of gay lives and the suburbs is confuted by the recent profusion of gay stories, on screen and in print, which are based mostly or entirely within suburbia. What I wish to describe as "gay suburban narratives" include, from Britain, *Beautiful Thing* (UK, 1996), which takes the working-class housing estate of Thamesmead, southeast London, as its location. The film depicts two teenage boys' discovery of their sexualities—and each other—and culminates in an uplifting scene of same-sex dancing in the estate's central piazza. *Get Real* (UK, 1999) is another "coming-out" drama, and whilst set in an ostensibly very different kind of suburbia, the

middle-class new town of Basingstoke, the film is similar to *Beautiful Thing* in that it dreams of establishing a gay suburban presence. One of the youthful protagonists even wishes that his parents would elope in order that he and his lover may take over the family home. From the US there is the academy-award-winning *American Beauty* (USA, 1999) and the television series *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001), both of which incorporate multiple homosexual narratives that parallel and bisect the suburban family home. In fiction there is a considerable range of writers exploring homosexuality and suburban environments, from those considered relatively conventional, such as David Leavitt (e.g. *While England Sleeps*, which resounds with the command "imagine Cockfosters," a refrain that sends the protagonist exploring the outlying suburbs of Thirties London (Leavitt 1995 [1993]) to "literary outlaws" like Dennis Cooper, particularly his novels *Closer* (1989) and *Try* (1994). From Australia for instance there is Christos Tsiolkas's *Loaded* (1995)—adapted to screen as *Head On* (Australia, 1998)—which follows a wandering and alienated gay Greek-Australian man through multicultural though still wholly suburban Melbourne.

The cultural products detailed above amount to the briefest sketch of the extent of gay suburban narratives, highlighting only some of the more widely disseminated texts. But already their number and variety suggests that there are many more kinds of responses to suburbia than the stark choice between flight and hiding outlined by Medhurst. To be sure, many of these texts are conventionally scathing about both the suburban landscape, frequently declaimed to be dehumanizing in its monotony and drabness, and the "suburban mentality," comprising of, in equal parts, material aspiration and conservative insularity. In this respect gay suburban narratives appear to stand as a continuation of the plethora of writings from earlier in the twentieth century that castigated the suburbs unrelentingly. These texts—almost entirely the output of middle- and upper-middle-class writers—have since been collectively labeled the "suburban critical canon" (Mattingly 1997), so familiar and uniform are their execrations of suburban landscape and life. Writers held the suburbs in contempt for despoiling the exurban countryside: see for instance the anxiety in E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*, where the "red rust" of suburban housing is judged to be encroaching on the rural idyll of the eponymous house (Forster 1992 [1910]: 316). The maddeningly iterative landscapes of speculative suburban development were also judged to be places of intolerable regulation or incarceration. The anonymous, ubiquitous street of George Bowling, the downtrodden anti-hero of George Orwell's *Coming up for Air* is, for example, "just a prison with the cells all in a row. A line of semi-detached torture chambers" (Orwell 1987 [1939]: 13). Else, suburbs were simply deemed the fittingly banal habitat of a spiritually and culturally impoverished people, the lower-middle classes. John Betjemen's notorious poem "Slough" begs for the destruction of the eponymous new town, where the men-folk do little

other than "talk of sports and makes of cars/ In various bogus Tudor bars" (in Skelton 1964: 75). C. Day Lewis decries the pelmet-high horizons of the ubiquitous villa-dweller, taking the new availability of luxuries—in particular mass-produced labor-saving devices and soft furnishings—as demonstrative of suburbanites' feminine indolence and depoliticized self-satisfaction: they are "at bay in villas [...] content with cushions" (Day Lewis 1992: 161). I will return later to the long-established association between embourgeoisized femininity and the suburban domestic interior as it strongly permeates certain recent gay texts.

For most intellectuals in the early to mid-twentieth century, like the term "the masses," "the word 'suburban' [was] a sign for the unknowable" (Carey 1992: 53). Contributors to the suburban critical canon were typically distanced and isolated from the culture they mistrusted and feared. By contrast, more recent suburban narratives are much more likely to be steeped in the experience of suburbs. Miranda Sawyer's recent exploration of Britain's suburbs, *Park and Ride*, for instance, is avowedly inspired by the author's suburban provenance (Sawyer 1999). According to Mark Clapson, much the same can be said for historians of suburbanization: an increasing number preface their work with a declaration of their suburban background, which apparently correlates with noticeably less condemnatory assessments of suburbia (Clapson 2003: 9). It is of course certainly the case the suburban origins of some cultural producers inspire little else than vitriol: for example, almost the whole of Mike Leigh's cinematic oeuvre, from *Abigail's Party* (BBC, 1977) to *Vera Drake* (UK, 2004), constitutes a sustained and withering attack on the aspirant pretensions of suburbia and, in particular, suburban women.[2] Nevertheless, numerous recent suburban narratives accord with Paul H. Mattingly's desire to wrest the cultural evaluation of suburbs away from the suburban critical canon and for it to be taken into the hands of those who have invested their lives there. Instead of a place that is always alien or merely escaped from, both Mattingly (1997: 41–2) and Peter Lang wish to see more analysis of the attractions of suburbs, their "tremendous gut appeal" (Lang 1997: 7).

Gay narratives, particularly, frequently locate in suburbia sources of excitement and opportunity, usually sexual. By identifying sites of sexual interest in the suburbs, however, gay stories are not mere variants of the conventional "dual-narrative" of suburbia, where respectable conformity—neat lawns and washed-every-Sunday cars, nine-to-five regularity, etc.—conceals (hetero)sexual licentiousness going on indoors. Arguably one of the most graphic and critical renderings of this kind of sexual duplicity was the early punks' choice of fetish outfits and paraphernalia for everyday wear. Such a style was, according Barry Langford, "intended as both deeply suburban and a clear rebuke to a suburban sexuality they excoriated as hypocritical, dissimulating and coercive" (Langford 2000: 70).[3] But if gay narratives

also exhibit some kind of double aspect, it is produced differently from performances of straight suburbia. Whereas the latter are facilitated with relative ease by the secure binary of public/private, gay stories necessarily invert or complicate this dichotomy: cruising for sex, for example, typically occurs in *semi*-secret; occluded from the mainstream public but in places visible to and permeable by other men seeking sex with men.

I wish to outline a more subtle and productive way of approaching suburbia in gay texts. Rather than measuring the extent to which gay writers reproduce or alter mainstream constructions of the suburbs, the locations of gay suburban narratives would be better appreciated as sites of negotiation, where sexually dissident cultural producers may assess and contest the forms of interaction between themselves or their own subcultures and mainstream society. Indeed, gay suburban narratives often constitute precisely what Alan Sinfield hails as "subcultural contributions," interventions which "[discuss] the relations that we have among ourselves and the mainstream, and invite us to negotiate new situations in the future" (Sinfield 1998: 115). These same gay narratives also fuel the expansion of the once monologic discourse on the suburbs. Roger Webster claims that the new heteroglossia surrounding suburbia increasingly shows it to be "a zone of contested meaning" (Webster 2000: 6) and projects such as Webster's *Expanding Suburbia* have done much to complicate constructions of the suburbs along lines of class, race, nationality, and gender. Certainly, however, the absence of sexuality in this list, coupled with a reciprocal suburban lacuna in much of the recent pioneering work on sexual geographies (e.g. Bell and Valentine 1995; Ingram *et al.* 1997) has also provided motivation for writing this article.

To be sure, suburbs do feature frequently and prominently in gay narratives because, along with the rest of the population, most gay men and lesbians have at least grown up in suburban environments.[4] It is also true that the dominant formation of gay and lesbian subcultures is still distinctly metropolitan. However, the identification of the city as "home," as opposed to the place that is left behind, is a transition that is not always unproblematic: Sinfield acknowledges "for lesbians and gay men the diasporic sense of separation and loss, so far from affording a principle of coherence for our subcultures, may actually attach to aspects of the (heterosexual) culture of our childhood" (Sinfield 1998: 30). Yet having emerged, or indeed, being ever-emergent from straight culture, confers key strategic opportunities. One such advantage, according to Sinfield, is that "at least we can't be told to go back to where we came from, as happens to racial minorities in Britain." Critically, these very origins in heterosexual culture have the power to disturb: gay and lesbian people are the "perfect subversive implants, the quintessential enemy within" (Sinfield 1997: 31). Jonathan Dollimore calls this potential to provoke

insecurity the "perverse dynamic," "that fearful interconnectedness whereby the antithetical inheres within, and is produced by, what it opposes" (Dollimore 1991: 33). Gay suburban narratives commonly seek to engage with and manipulate this allegedly threatening hybridity. Instead of merely denigrating the suburbs from a safe distance, these texts attempt to *defile* suburbia. Through acts of symbolic subversion, specifically, by disrupting suburban-domestic with the assertion of a homosexual presence, gay characters aim to undermine hegemonic heterosexism. Such acts of desecration are facilitated by rendering the domestic interior as a religious space—usually quite straightforward given, as I will discuss, certain rooms' established centrality to the rituals of family.

Such attempts to destabilize heterosexist hegemony, however, are usually quite limited in effect. In the texts that I discuss below, dominant forms of sexual and social relations are rarely altered substantially, and never permanently, by attacks made against them at the level of the symbolic. Indeed, the same texts serve rather to puncture the optimism arising from certain debates in the field of sexual geographies, in particular, the practice of "queering" space. When queer activists address issues of space and sexual oppression, for instance, they typically aim first to demonstrate the ambient heterosexuality of ostensibly neutral, public environments, and then to undermine the hegemony of straight space by foregrounding its contingency and performativity (see Bell and Valentine 1995: 18–21). The novels I examine in this article suggest, at least, that simply to indicate that a power relation is neither natural nor inevitable is not in itself necessarily disabling.

The inability of gay suburban narratives to undermine heterosexual familialism is further compounded by the tendency, as alluded to by Sinfield, to become deeply attached to the family home and its environs. Suburban homes readily conjure the most soothing aspects of early life: the stability and comfort of the domestic interior and the calming predictability of the ubiquitous suburban exterior. Just as reassuring as soft furnishings and iterative streetscapes are the strong affective ties of family. Indeed, these material backdrops often metonymically represent, respectively, maternal and paternal roles. The familial environment is valued so highly because it constitutes a pre-sexual space. If emergent adolescent sexuality, one of the first drives that breaks the containment of the family, generates at least as much shame as it does pleasure, then the family home is very likely to be viewed nostalgically as a pre-lapsarian ideal.

Yet, as suggested above, suburbs are often also sites of sexual discovery. So, evidently, there is a potential contradiction between two appealing aspects of the suburbs: the pre-sexual confines of the family and the sexualized landscapes of suburbia. Equally, attempts to validate suburban territories, such as sites where men meet together to have sex, conflict with strategies of subverting the

suburban home, when images of domesticity are ascribed to places like cruising areas. Gay suburban narratives are typically structured by the exploration and attempted resolution of these tensions. The following two sections of this article address in turn these distinct conflicts. The first section examines the friction between sexual and non-sexual aspects of suburbia, particularly as represented by certain architectural sites. The second explores strategies of disrupting domesticity, and investigates some of the contradictions that may arise, as well as the general limitations of such tactics. Both sections are predominantly comprised of an examination of Oscar Moore's *A Matter of Life and Sex* (1991). The novel bears sustained scrutiny as it is so acutely aware of the contradictory attractions of the suburbs—in particular, of domestic interior—whilst offering sophisticated yet ultimately unsuccessful coping strategies. The article will conclude with a briefer consideration of work by Hanif Kureishi and James Robert Baker, which suggest more effective ways of responding to the suburbs.

"SUBURBAN SCHIZOPHRENIA:" COTTAGING VS VILLADOM

Set largely within the suburbs of north London, Oscar Moore's *A Matter of Life and Sex* is a distinctly hybrid text. As Esther Saxey astutely observes, *A Matter* straddles two principle gay genres of writing: the coming-out story, and the AIDS narrative (Saxey 2004: 104–12). The novel's composition, interweaving the guilt-laden first half of the coming-out story with the later part of the AIDS narrative—the descent through illness and towards death—suggests bleak reading indeed. Furthermore, *A Matter* offers no respite in the form of a sustaining gay subculture, which might have rendered all the anguish of the process of coming out worthwhile, or provided support for those suffering with AIDS. The novel's protagonist, Hugo Harvey, judges his condition a bitter irony, having caught a "gay disease" when he has kept himself "so firmly outside the scene, standing on the touchline with his back turned" (Moore 1992 [1991]: 234). Alan Sinfield comments that Hugo "prefers to imagine that being a call-boy is not part of the 'gay scene'" (Sinfield 1998: 41). To this I would add the subculture of cruising and cottaging that Hugo also becomes heavily involved in, which I will examine in detail shortly.

Hugo's ambivalence towards the gay "community," as he sees it, is certainly exacerbated by his complete preoccupation with his suburban home environment. The text is strongly drawn to both pre-sexual and sexualized visions of the suburb. Yet, simultaneously, Hugo wages a one-man war against the site that represents hypocrisy and repressive conformity: the suburban household. *A Matter* negotiates the contradictory attractions and repellence of suburbia through a performance of hybridity. The protagonist enacts a schizophrenic separation, becoming two characters: Hugo the mother's boy, decorous

and domestic, subsequently to be found "round the tea-table over bread and jam and a slice of cheddar cheese;" and David, "the one who played in strange men's bedrooms, cars, offices and kitchens. The one who didn't have a family, who didn't have any school to go to or tea to go back for" (p. 27). The division between these two characters is as strict as the separation of the worlds they respectively inhabit. David is originally created as a means of protecting Hugo's identity: such a distinctive name renders him too easily locatable if he were ever to get into trouble (p. 26). The fear of exposure, however, runs both ways:

> For all David's street-tough masquerade, it was Hugo who frightened people. [...] Once sex was over and a spent David dissolved, leaving a tense and testy Hugo in his place, David's catches were unnerved to find an intelligent, nicely-spoken local boy in their house. It was as if they felt they had less to fear from the tough little tyke who might blackmail them than from the nice local schoolboy who might tell his parents and remember the address (p. 38).

The "nicely-spoken"/"street-tough" Hugo/David figure is certainly also a performance of class difference and, arguably, their enforced separation is distinctly suburban in character—the creation and maintenance of class-segregated environments being one of the original motivations frequently presumed to have driven and sustained suburbanization (see Clapson 2003: 69–72). Nevertheless, the distinction between Hugo's housebound identity and David's of-the-street mobility is more significant. True enough, David's lack of any need to return to school or to tea is itself only an enactment of autonomy. For Hugo does indeed need to return home: "[The men] never understood that David's time was limited by Hugo's parents. And by Hugo himself" (p. 29). However, sex in the suburbs does afford Hugo/David a multifaceted form of liberation from suburban domesticity. For the "cottages," the public toilets on suburban side and high streets where David spends most of his time waiting for sex, actually offer a welcome respite from the emotional vacuity of suburban aspiration. From a surprisingly tender age, his home suburb of Hadley has instilled in Hugo a keen sense of material inadequacy. The daily walk from his parents' modest "villa" home at 40, Mulberry Avenue, past the increasingly expansive and well-appointed homes of his friends, to his hilltop primary ("St Monica's C. of E. School for Children of the Comparatively Affluent" (p. 8)), literally requires repeated social climbing. Whilst David's absence of any middle-class mores is also a performance. what is not is the way the cottage replaces the large detached house as the pinnacle of social achievement, and how cottaging in general represents an alternative form of sociality. Indeed, not insignificantly, the Hadley

venue is referred to by David as "the cottage at the top of the hill" (p. 48).

As well as providing a simple alternative to conventional home life, the cottage offers a form of cultural heritage and a sense of history otherwise absent in Moore's suburbia. The public toilet in Hadley is seen as ideal because of its age and its partial isolation from the public, both aspects offering the men who frequent the place a degree of autonomy:

> It was a perfect cottage, semi-secluded but with good parking and a strong flow past of accidental customers; Victorian architecture allowing for the right degree of decay—wooden doors with holes, dim lighting, fifty-odd years of graffiti, no space for an attendant, and within easy reach of the shops, allowing for an endless variety of excuses to cover an endless variety of visits (p. 33).

The description's resemblance to an real estate agent's patter—the place appears characterful whilst remaining practical—is probably a pun on "cottage." The public toilet is therefore being consciously offered, again, as an alternative site of interaction to the middle-class suburban home. However, the Hadley cottage is not simply valued because it is old. The toilet's decrepitude, for instance, is only appealing because it is useful; that is, conducive to having sex. Similarly, the ancient graffiti are like so many dead letters: only the minority of messages which arrange meetings in the future are of interest. Moreover, David has nothing but vitriol for the older men who may well have laid down the earliest inscriptions. There is no positive intergenerational interaction to speak of at all. Nevertheless, the very accumulation of these messages, ignored and left unerased by the wider public and the authorities, lends historical weight to a territorial claim on the cottage. One of the functions of graffiti is, after all, the demarcation of territory. And indeed, non-cottaging toilets are referred to as "Dead territory. The writing was on the wall:"—both figuratively and literally—"a few football slogans, some furious racism, a half-rubbed off story [about a] man whose wife wanted three men in a bed and was horny as hell but that was two years ago according to the date at the bottom" (pp. 27–8). Cottage literature (sometimes referred to as "loiterature") is also instructive, putting into words or pictures—no matter how crudely—the desires of the uninitiated, whilst re-assuring the same individuals that their sexual feelings are not unique (see Leap 1996: 75–89). The proliferation of erotic narratives and drawings in cottages has a somewhat more complex social function than the simple trysting scrawl. Such stories do sometimes operate like the more straightforward messages, written as a means to sex, left as elaborate bait by "the sexual hermits [who wait] in silence behind the cubicle door." Indeed, Hugo warns that one

must not allow oneself to get too aroused from reading them lest one be "finished before anything started" (p. 28). But importantly, these "lurid concoctions" also literally inscribe the physical structures of the public toilet with scenes from a gay sexual fantasia. It is, therefore, not difficult to see how the physical place can be conceived of as, reciprocally, a gay space in a gay imaginary.

A further positive aspect of suburban gay sex and its associated social interaction is the manner in which it transfigures the environment's bland and joyless terrain. Filtered through the eyes of a member of the secret subculture of cottaging, suburbs are transformed, rendered in explicitly exotic and carnivalesque terms. Cottages are referred to as "pleasure palaces" (p. 35). The act of cottaging is described as a play, with cast lists (p. 41), a carnival (p. 41), and a "parade" (p. 98) but most often as an elaborate dance, the "toilet tango." These carnivalesque transformations do, in part, make up for the seediness and tedium of aspects of cottaging. Indeed some of the descriptions focus in on the exoticness and the eroticism, and then the banality and repulsiveness of the locations and practices, within the same paragraph, or even in a single sentence. For example, the excitement and the perpetual motion, the elegance and close physical involvement with other participants of the "tango" describe the highs of cottaging. Yet the dance also incorporates David's experience of the flipside: the wasted hours and the boredom of standing motionless; the frustration of not connecting, or of failing to satisfactorily, after which David is hit by a postcoital "grey wave of depression" (p. 39).

Whilst distinctly ambivalent, the cottaging "scene" still constitutes *A Matter*'s most substantial and positive evocation of a sexually dissident subculture. In particular, the sense of the cottage's history is one of its most reassuring aspects. Other AIDS narratives seek to uncover (and recover) gay suburban histories. James Robert Baker's *Tim and Pete* (1993), set in Los Angeles, immediately after the riots of 1992, unearths several sites rich in gay history. The predominant metaphor of rediscovery is archaeological: the eponymous duo's journey takes them through the temporary ruins of a metropolis that is constantly rebuilding itself; through the evacuation or destruction of the urban fabric, this history is rendered visible. Much of the gay history is to be found not in, say, West Hollywood, but in outlying areas. At Long Beach, for instance, amongst the foundation grids of the amusement park's demolished buildings which are laid out in the manner of the site of an archaeological dig, Tim comes across "an expanse of brown, tile-patterned linoleum" (Baker 1993: 55). Like a crumby equivalent of a Roman mosaic, the old flooring constitutes a historical stratum that evokes memories of teenage sexual pleasure in the seedy arcades. This reconnection with sexual histories demonstrates how gay characters like Pete and Tim have to deal with their promiscuous pasts before AIDS. That both come to

positively accept their histories indicates their ability to locate a gay presence in suburbia that is both independent of family structures, and one that is based on pleasure, not guilt or frustration.

By contrast, much of David Leavitt's fiction works in precisely the opposite direction, and strongly attaches to childhood visions of the family at the cost of an independent adult sexuality. In the early short story, "Territory," a young gay man returns home to visit his mother in "residential Northern California, the land of expensive ranch-style houses." After attempting to revisit and relive—altogether unsatisfactorily—his earliest sexual experiences (in the back garden) he concludes that "guilt goes with the territory." Subsequently, he seeks to undo the shame and the imposition he feels he has caused his parents by coming out by imagining himself mothered once again, "wrapped [...] in the childhood smells of perfume and brownies" (Leavitt 1984: 6, 10, 28). A similar kind of infantalization is offered by one of Leavitt's later novels, despite its very different context, 1930s London. The principal character of *While England Sleeps*, Brian Botsford, closely modeled on Stephen Spender, uses his and his lover's respective suburban origins—Richmond and Upney—to synecdochically represent their cross-class relationship. However, Botsford's sense of guilt after Phelan's death drives him to seek an imaginary refuge in the idealized feminine realm of his childhood: "I was imagining I could [...] head home from this nightmare, toward Richmond, childhood, the light playing on the river. My mother, alive, with Nanny and Charlotte: three women drinking coffee in the garden" (Leavitt 1995 [1993]: 172–3).

Hugo seems to have more in common with Pete and Tim here: on his sickbed, Hugo insists he has "conquered regrets for things done. The past was not to be denied" (p. 57). But, as we shall see, his validation of his own promiscuity is far from substantive; indeed, his sex life becomes a means of infiltrating and despoiling the domestic sphere.

PARLOR GAMES

The suburban cottage in *A Matter* provides an alternative site of social interaction to the family home. However, the very language used to describe suburban sex—including the term "cottage"—draws heavily on references to domesticity. *A Matter*, then, exhibits a strategy of manipulating signifiers of the home in order to both denigrate and recuperate suburban domesticity. For example, another of David's names for the cottage is "piss-parlour" (p. 98). This oxymoronic term rather resembles the names for diminutive emporia that specialize in singular, indulgent goods or services (e.g. beauty parlor, ice cream parlor). As before, David's sexualized reading of the suburbs creates space for delight that is separate from the heterosexual family home, whilst acknowledging the frequent unpleasantness of the environment. But, inescapably, the use of "parlour" also evokes

HOME CULTURES

185

the very epicenter of bourgeois, feminized domesticity. A particularly Victorian incarnation of the sitting room, the parlor was, in most British middle-class homes in the nineteenth century, "the center of the home and the most important room in the house." The parlor was also "very distinctly gendered feminine" (Logan 2001: 22–31). It was women who were wholly responsible for the furnishing and ornamentation of the room, becoming "curators" of the interior space that accentuated not only familial wealth but also the domestic order (Ware 1999: 62). In *A Matter*, total female suzerainty over the domestic interior is strongly reinforced by the ascription of a reciprocally feeble masculinity to the suburban exterior environment. A leering old man who surprises Hugo is of the same color as the streets and houses and is able to merge with "the colourless patina of suburbia" (p. 43). The man is the exact opposite of a later description of an elderly woman, who stands uprightly, quite out of proportion and "brightly coloured in a small suburban sitting room" (p. 315). Hugo's kind but ineffectual father is seen as similarly diffused into the external fabric of suburbia, "remaining in the background where he had always been, where he was comfortable" (p. 183). As a ghostly presence at his own funeral, Hugo cannot even recognize the man on his mother's arm: "it could have been his father. It could have been Mr Smithy from number 16. They both had black hair" (p. 316). In Hadley, fathers are ubiquitous suit-and-tied commuters, identifiable only by door number. Expressions like "piss-parlour", then, directly assault the domestic interior, singling out in particular the primary ordering feminine presence, the mother.

Moore's use of the word "parlour" is manifoldly apposite. For, whilst seemingly anachronistic, the term rests comfortably with the numerous other descriptions of 1970s domestic interiors in *A Matter*. The reception rooms of these suburban houses are uniformly heavily furnished and ornamented. Whilst expressions like "chintz-and-glass" constitute a refrain to denounce conservative suburban morality (e.g. with his friend Cynthia's temporary disapproval of his friends and his sex life, "her voice [took] on an edge that sounded like net curtains and chintz sofas and bone china cups" (p. 152)), they also castigate the Victorian-style "density" of these interiors. For just like the nineteenth-century parlor, these rooms, overladen with soft furnishings, etc., are defined by—or from Hugo's perspective, choked by—femininity. Indeed, "chintz" as an emblem of old-fashioned English suburbanity has remained in broad parlance (see Gilbert and Preston 2003: 194–5).

The use of "parlour" is especially appropriate because, like the cottage, it blurs the boundary between public and private. According to Thad Logan, "the public/private distinction becomes tenuous in the vicinity of the parlour" (Logan 2001: 27). The room was a space for attending to visitors, and therefore the most formal, public place of a private house. But the parlor also constituted a private

retreat for the family. The toilet/cottage also oscillates between the same distinction: as toilet, a public space for a private function; as cottage, a (semi-)secret site for either public display (at the urinals), or partially private consummation (in the cubicles). Additionally, the parlor is the only room in the house not given over to biological functions. With "*piss*-parlour," Moore expropriates bourgeois refinement to the toilet/cottage, elevating it above the merely bodily level, whilst simultaneously soiling domestic decorum and feminine civility by association. The term also brings to mind several instances, examined below, where David does actually defile domestic interiors with bodily fluids.

Indeed, the cottage-as-parlor echoes the way in which many of David's sexual adventures end up within, or rather, lead him back to, suburban domestic interiors. A key example of this redirection, an account of Hugo's co-conspirators on the cottaging scene, begins to reveal what is at the heart of Hugo's sexual dissidence. Once again, just like the act of cottaging, and the venue itself, the other cottagers are rendered simultaneously carnivalesque and barren. David says of his fellow "dancers:" "like all good tangos, like all good carnivals, the cast list was varied and colourful." Yet the first two examples that immediately follow are anything but:

> Married men on the run from loneliness who took David to high rise apartments, peachy with the smells of female laundry and did sex with him on the marital bed before fleeing, ducking the gaze of fascinated neighbours. Quiet men living in solitary confinement in suburban backwaters with untended gardens and unhoovered carpets, whose lives revolved around the television, the Music for Pleasure record collection and the fridge (p. 41).

The lives and homes of these two types of men are about as far from the carnival as it possible to get. Neither varied nor colorful, each kind appears to lead a bleak and lonely existence. Also, the homes of both are equally defined by femininity—either a stifling presence (soft fabrics again, this time with a distinct and cloying aroma), or a crippling absence. Another conspirator, "the Blue Cortina Man," seemingly sounds racier, since he is defined purely by his car, and therefore his mobility. But he as well turns out to be rooted to an exceptionally feminine base, living "in a room with chintz-covered sofas and little lace cloths and occasional tables" (p. 49).

Whilst sex in suburbia is initially offered as an alternative to heterosexual family life, as discussed in the previous section, the same practices now inexorably redirect David/Hugo back to the feminine domestic sphere. In fact, the dull domesticity of these men is the only thing that really excites David: they only succeed in becoming carnivalesque when he is able to disrupt the feminine

interior, either in the cottage *qua* parlor, or after having been led back to the sitting-room proper. David has obviously a considerable erotic investment in such spaces: "the chintz and quilts and ornamental mantelpieces of their suburban sitting rooms only made him more randy. It was desecration and blasphemy in the sitting room" (p. 119). This sacrilege is not diffuse, broadly targeting, as one edition's back-cover blurb claims, "suburban hypocrisy" (Moore 1993: back cover). The narration does insist at one point that such an attack was, more or less, the protagonist's motivation: "For all that Hugo wanted to take revenge on the normal world, wanted to take it for a ride and charge it double, he didn't want to shock his mother" (p. 179). But the defiled icon in question is manifestly nothing and no one but his mother. After all, it is Mrs Harvey's own children who are said "to be caught up in her cult" (p. 12). Like a primitive pagan deity, fused with the omnipotence of the Christian god, she is the singular emotional pole in Hugo's world throughout his life: "Hugo loved his mother. And he hated her. She was the most frightening person in his world and the only real authority he recognised. She was god. He was quite sure that if the god at Sunday school ever met her he would do whatever she told him to" (p. 11).

The designation of Hugo's sitting-room sex as sacrilegious is, then, entirely appropriate. The suburban domestic interiors of the men he has sex with are not exactly temples dedicated to his mother, but they metonymically represent his quasi-religious reverence for her. Hugo's "desecration and blasphemy" is, then, precisely a way of attacking his mother. His "irreligious" acts are therefore much less part of a broader political gesture of disrupting the heterosexual home. To re-invoke the parlor here further compounds the deification of the mother figure in the home. Alison Ravetz argues that in the first half of the twentieth century, the domestic interior was not "designed to accommodate religious observances—the only vestige of this once important function of the home was in the parlour, with its hearth, family photographs and family Bible" (Ravetz with Turkington 1995: 149). Indeed, the parlor typically "contained [...] family treasures: ritual objects like religious and royal portraits, candlesticks, the best clock" (Ravetz with Turkington 1995: 156). The parlor was the only significantly ritualized space in the house, where "family" was infused with a religiosity not found elsewhere. Significantly, the transition from parlor to "sitting room" in the mid-twentieth century was more than a mere updating of nomenclature. Ravetz contends that "this was to do not so much with social status as the needs of different members of the household, most particularly teenagers, who might be driven out of the house altogether in the evenings unless they could get away from the family in the living room" (Ravetz with Turkington 1995: 158). The change implies that the parlor was rendered less family-oriented (and, likely, more neutrally gendered) precisely as a means of containing the family. Hugo's sitting room

evidently physically more resembles the earlier form, the parlor (which, again, metonymically stands for his mother): he is repulsed by it, yet returns to versions of the same room time after time. If nothing else, this very repetitiveness demonstrates the inefficacy of Hugo's attempts in either disrupting ("charging double") the suburban world, or more specifically, in disturbing his mother.

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

Other texts contemporary with the publication of Moore's novel seek to conjugate irreligiousness and the sex act in the suburban home. Unlike A Matter, however, these novels are much clearer about the limits to the subversive possibilities of disrupting domesticity in this manner. Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia occasionally crops up in the gay fiction sections in bookshops and libraries, though is more appropriately and more frequently (Langford 2000; Oswell 1998) characterized as a queer text. The novel evinces a suspicion of fixed identity categories whilst seeking to inhabit all kinds of in-between-ness. Its protagonist, Karim Amir, is multiply hybrid: he is even-handedly bisexual, without ever using the label, and of mixed-race and cross-class parentage (the novel opens with a clichéd, proud declaration of identity, which is immediately partly effaced: "My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost" (Kureishi 1990: 1)). The first sexual episode recounted in Buddha involves Karim's father and his lover Eva in her Beckenham garden. Observing—somewhat voyeuristically—his father's rather noisy infidelity, Karim wonders "Was I conceived like this [...] in the suburban night air, to the wailing of Christian curses from the mouth of a renegade Muslim masquerading as a Buddhist?" (p. 16) Rather than being disruptively sacrilegious, the suburban sex here is an act of fecund syncretism. Moreover, Karim's musings on his own origins suggest that, far from being disturbed by the allegedly disruptive properties of hybridity and performativity exhibited here, suburbia actually produces them, seemingly through as natural a process as birth.

In Baker's Tim and Pete, the protagonists revisit the ruins of Tim's familial home a while after it has been destroyed by a landslide. The gutted shell of this perfect suburban home, "our once-sleek Richard Neutra dreamhouse," is reminiscent of a temple once dedicated to the American Dream, now defiled: "you could see that kids had been coming here to fuck." The interior even has a desecrated altar: "in the yellow breakfast nook where my mother had served Aunt Jemima pancakes on sunny mornings in 1959, someone had taken a dump" (Baker 1995 [1993]: 36). Pete and Tim almost can not help but commit one last vengeful profanity themselves. Remembering how as a teenager he was too fearful to ever contemplate bringing somebody home with his father, "Joe McCarthy in the next room," Tim enacts

with Pete a sexual scene invoking "some surly punk from high school who always gave [Tim] a hard time [and who] probably just wanted to do this." Echoing Hugo's excitement regarding his sitting-room sex, Tim declares that this performance of sexual subversion was "one of the hottest times we ever had" (p. 36). However, Pete and Tim's desire to unsettle the suburban sexual *status quo* always manifest as shock *fantasies*. Both characters balk at the idea of putting these performances into practice, that is, in having an actual, not merely an imagined, straight audience. In comparison, a much more militant group of HIV-positive artist activists, who have organized what amounts to a terrorist cell in the suburbs, are shown to have no such qualms. Their stunts include interrupting family television viewing with transmissions of gay pornography and the erection of fearful sculptural works, including an interactive sexual "contraption" made out of recycled suburban staples: household appliances and toys. Similarly, in their other suburban hideaway, an ex-Boy-Scout camp hall, the group's leader has spliced together sexual articles with more familiar equipment in order to disturb the building's more conventional users: "'And here we have our memorabilia.' [He] pulled out a large cardboard box filled with an odd mixture of Boy Scout paraphernalia and sex toys—tent stakes and dildos, steel utensil kits and cock rings. 'We're going to toss some of this stuff around eventually, casual reminders of a simpler time'" (p. 216).

Ultimately though, the militants realize the limitations of a strategy based on a certain kind of confrontational artistic practice. With the hybrid constructions they have installed in their living room and at the Scout hall they aim to disable the equipment's original function—as tools to indoctrinate, particularly children, into hetero-patriarchy—but it seems these artworks have had rather too much energy put into them relative to their effect; hence the artwork's constituent parts have not been transformed, they remain toys, playthings. Subsequently, the group progresses to more direct (and violent) methods. This change in tactics rather reflects the shift away from "queer" strategies in Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender politics in general; the fusing, destabilization or erasure of heteronormative codes. boundaries, and spaces that is typical of queer practice is more likely to be seen as a temporary measure only, at best with the power to briefly or intermittently confound, but not to overturn homophobia. Domestic space seems particularly resilient to queer praxis: one observation from *Queers in Space*, an otherwise optimistic anthology exploring space and queer activism, admits that not even a crowd of joyriding ambisexual youths fucking loudly in a suburban semi "can tear down the walls" (Bell 1997: 84). In any case. the potential for shock fades rapidly over time; indeed, "queer" has been rapidly co-opted, even commodified. For instance, from the same anthology, Jean-Ulrick Désert unintentionally suggests that the most dynamic response to new forms of "queer" domesticity has been the provision by the

housing industry of "spaces of great permeability and flexibility," such as loft apartments (Désert 1997: 22).

Tim and Pete demonstrates that a more productive way of responding to the suburbs is again to concentrate instead on particularly subcultural investments in and interpretations of the landscape. Whilst the activists may be having fun by locating their headquarters in a "family-oriented neighborhood," Tim is more interested in the way a basketball hoop outside the base evokes a gay porn-film set up, or how the swimming-pool has "reassuring" "Hockney resonances" (p. 175). Importantly, these adult gay associations also help fend off the kind of infantilization that besets many of David Leavitt's protagonists. For example, when listening to a song based on a Fifties children's book that "depicted a little boy leading the Robed One by the hand into his suburban home" (p. 126), Tim falls into a nostalgic and melancholic reverie of his own childhood. But feelings provoked by thoughts of lost childhood innocence are shown to immediately attach instead to entirely adult associations: "Jeff. A sense that Jeff hadn't done anything, he was innocent and shouldn't have died. Jeff lifting himself out of the swimming pool, the hair on his chest and stomach dripping water, his wet, glossy, pink-lipped grin" (p. 127). Undoubtedly provoked by the struggles faced by gay communities in wake of the AIDS epidemic and a state-sponsored backlash, Baker's novel is arguing emphatically for a more productive refocusing of feelings of grief and loss. Unlike any of the other texts considered in this article then, *Tim and Pete* demonstrates both an awareness of the ways in which visions of suburbia can draw gay men into nostalgic impotence, and of the limitations of attempts to subvert familial domesticity. The novel suggests that a better way of interacting with "the straightest space imaginable" is to broaden and strengthen gay subcultures by drawing on specifically the numerous and diverse gay experiences, histories, and readings of suburbia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES
1. Since the publication of Medhurst's essay, however, several sociologists, at least in the US, have begun to explore the experiences of lesbians and gay men who have chosen to live, often openly, in suburbia (Baxendall and Ewen 2001: 233; Brekhus 2003; Kirkey and Forsyth 2001).
2. See Mark Clapson (2003: 10–13) for a wide-ranging survey of anti-suburban sentiment in English and North American postwar popular culture.
3. Miranda Sawyer's foray into the swingers' scene in sensible Surrey seems to confirm the binary of outward conformity versus

private irregular sexual practices as being part of a contemporary mythology of suburbia (Sawyer 1999: 84–101). However, John Carey notes that the trope is a long-established one, citing Arthur Machen's 1922 novel *The Secret Glory*, as an early tirade against suburbia's "abominable hypocrisy" (Carey 1992: 51–2).

4. In Britain, recent official figures regarding the population as a whole vary considerably, depending on which planning definition has been used, though all suggest the country has a suburban majority. According to a report by the Independent Transport Commission (2004), the proportion of the British population living in suburban areas is 84% and set to increase still further over the next fifteen years.

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