Introduction: Suburbia

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While suburban architecture and lifestyles are most commonly associated with a bland, middle-class, mainstream torpor, suburbia taken as a text tends to elicit markedly extreme positions. In the late 1980s, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker's *Panic Encyclopedia* included a lengthy entry on suburbia that, *a propos* of the encyclopedia's title, verged on hysteria:

> The postmodern suburb ushers in the new (cosmetic) style of "real imitation life."
> Its appearance was signaled by the movie, *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*,
> where progressively the pods grow the physiognomy of the everyday American,
> complete with the cloning of the shopping mall mentality. Here each comes
> equipped, at least nominally, with a Harlequin life programmed to Scott Peck's
> *The Road Less Traveled*. Each person in his or her own way "born again," the
> better to imitate the Way. Not that the Way need be religious or fundamentalist,
> but rather a way of life that grows on you, feeds from you, parasites you. It's the
> postmodern suburb, therefore, as a perfect ideological screen: lasered by flickering
> TV images, inscribed by shifting commodity-values, and interpellated by all of the
> violence, love and bickering voices of Mommy-Daddy-Me.

Such alarmist descriptions of suburbia are hardly unique to postmodernist hyperbole. In the 1950s, Lewis Mumford and other urban intellectuals inveighed against the planned communities springing up around them, much as contemporary critics such as Mike Davis currently attack urban sprawl. In 1961 Mumford wrote the following psychoanalysis of the suburbs:

> In the suburb one might live and die without marring the image of an innocent
> world, except when some shadow of its evil fell over a column in the newspaper.
> Thus the suburb served as an asylum for the preservation of illusion. Here
> domesticity could flourish, forgetful of the exploitation on which so much of it
> was based. Here individuality could prosper oblivious of the pervasive regimen-
> tation beyond. This was not merely a child-centered environment; it was based on
> a childish view of the world, in which reality was sacrificed to the pleasure
> principle. (494)

For these critics past and present, suburban communities represent a number of
horrors, from conformity and isolation to ecological devastation and the worst
kinds of classist and racist politics. As in the '50s, conservative planners and social
critics have continued to champion suburbia as a populist paradise, from the sub-
urban lawn as the last vestige of the Jeffersonian yeoman to suburbia as the only
truly populist life available anywhere in the world. Indeed, this view has been
defended most vigorously by Tom Martinson, who claims that the "promise of the
American ideal can still be fulfilled in our postwar suburbs" (32). Martinson goes
on to argue that critics of the suburbs tend not to be suburbanites themselves, but
condescending urban intellectuals who simply don't share the values of suburbia.
From his position, suburbanization is a completely positive development, and his
argument comes down to the simple fact that, as he puts it, the people who live in
the suburbs like it: "[T]he lesson for me is that people choose to live where they do
because their environment provides what they most value" (36). Hardly as visible
in public discourse, but perhaps far more influential, are the bureaucrats who de-
bate and endorse the governmental planning and regulation of development. Peter
Gordon and Harry W. Richardson, for example, argue that suburban sprawl is the
best solution to development for the foreseeable future. They refute the idea that
sprawl is a danger to open space or quality of life. Like Martinson, they also claim
that they are the real populists, arguing that "low-density settlement is the over-
whelming choice for residential living" (98). Martinson, Gordon, and Richardson all
refute the critics of suburbia with a cheery populism.

While critics of suburbia have remained sharply divided, this polarization has
been synthesized into a kind of generative irony driving almost every postwar,
American suburban narrative in both fiction and film. In the popular imagination,
postwar suburbia exists simultaneously as the ultimate icon of American values
and a horrific signifier of conformity and excess. Indeed, in books and films that
take suburbia as their subject, this polarization is almost always evident. It is
already firmly in place in the early '50s. That most typically suburban novel, Sloan
Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit,* finds in suburban domesticity salva-
tion from a hollow culture of urban big business. Nonetheless, the book begins
with a savage parody of suburban domesticity, where Tom and Betty Rath find the
routines of cocktail parties and petty neighborhood intrigues stifling. Keeping up
with the Jones's is a nightmare they long to escape, but they choose to flee from it
by comodifying and selling that very same lifestyle to others at the conclusion of
the book. Quite simply, they solve all their problems by becoming real estate
developers. While generations of readers have identified with Wilson's critique of

corporate culture, few have focused on this central irony that coordinates the book. This irony is a feature of suburban narratives as a genre. Even so recent a book as Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* functions through it. While the deaths at the heart of the book are relentlessly connected to the activities and commodities of suburban life in the '70s, the book is largely a nostalgic and lyric evocation of just those things, and almost every description in the book turns on it: "the sun had fallen below the horizon, but still lit the sky in an orange chemical streak more beautiful than nature" (201). The everday life of suburbia is rhapsodized by the narrators of the book despite the fact that it is unambiguously associated with horrifying deaths and ecological devastation. Perhaps the most compelling narrative of suburbia is the 1982 film *Poltergeist*. Indeed, the irony seems encoded in the very choices of writer and director. Written by Steven Spielberg, a shameless sentimentalizer of suburbia, the film was directed by Tobe Hooper, best known for *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The film functions by juxtaposing images of suburban plenitude and sentimentalized domestic bliss with scenes of supernatural horror. Here, suburbia is powerfully depicted as both an impossibly idyllic space for domestic pleasures and a horrifying architecture constructed through greed and founded on a disrespect of the sacred. Like *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and so many other suburban narratives, however, the film engages in displacements, celebrating the very domestic organizations and pleasures that are in large part at the heart of the film's horrors.

The extremism of critically polarized images of suburbia in critical texts, and the ironic sublation of those images in our fictional imagination, testifies to the power of these planned communities, their utopian aspirations, and their often horrifying reality. Yet while these images make for powerful fictions, they tend to occlude the complex realities of everyday life in suburbia. Suburbia has a long history that, as Robert Fishman and other critics demonstrate, reaches back well into the eighteenth century. Suburbia has gone through many incarnations, and its complex history has given rise to many different potentials and problems. The articles that follow engage a broad range of issues, moving beyond the iconic images of suburbia that inform our cultural imagination. Following the ground-breaking work of critics like Andrew Ross, these articles develop newer, more nuanced approaches to suburban architecture, social norms, and values that have come to influence every aspect of postwar life both in America and the larger world. In the following pages, our contributors engage many aspects of both suburbia as a deeply fraught sign and a complex reality, moving beyond the one-dimensional affirmation or closed-minded dismissal that has all too often informed critical discourse about what Fishman rightly calls the only utopian architectural scheme to be built and successfully inhabited in the twentieth century (xi).

In "Apocalypse in Suburbia," Mikita Brottman traces the transformation of suburbia from idealized utopia to the everyday setting for all the evils it initially hoped to exclude. Invoking a striking catalog of both real and fictional horrors, Brottman demonstrates not only the darker aspects of the suburban imaginary, but also the ways in which this would-be utopia has become a part of the struggles and problems that animate everyday life. Her account is all the more compelling by

including autobiographical reflections that do more than most criticism to rip the fronts off the critical appraisals of suburbia, relating how she herself first viewed particularly American postwar suburbia.

Both Elaine Lewinnek's "'Domestic and Respectable': Suburbanization and Social Control After the Great Chicago Fire" and Jessica Blaustein's "Counterprivates: An Appeal to Rethink Suburban Interiority" investigate the specifics of suburban experience and the historical roots of suburbanization in America. Lewinnek avoids the excesses of critical rhetoric and instead develops a carefully contextualized investigation of the unprecedented suburbanization prompted by the great Chicago fire of 1871. Drawing on a wide range of historical documents, she demonstrates the social forces that shaped the late nineteenth-century suburbanization of Chicago, emphasizing the role of Victorian ideologies of gender, class, and domesticity. As she puts it, "Chicago's great fire of 1871, like the flash from a camera, allows us to see many Chicagoans, all at once, discussing their built environment and the values they expected suburban-style houses to exert on their occupants." Like Lewinnek, Jessica Blaustein grounds her analysis of suburbia in careful historical research. Focusing on the first two decades of the twentieth century, she argues that a transformation and intensification of the concept of privacy informed the emerging suburbanization of America. While grounded in meticulous historical research, Blaustein goes on to connect this new emphasis on privacy to "theories of subjectivity, to self-concepts, to the form and shape people believe themselves to take." As she demonstrates, a wide range of people "equated individuality, independence, and moral virtue with an overwhelmingly suburban conception of private space." She concludes her geneology of privatization with a theory of the "counterprivate." According to Blaustein, counterprivates "exist simultaneously with so-called established privates but move in an opposite direction—not opposite from the public, but opposite from the kind of private stuck in that dichotomous relationship with the public." In this bold rethinking of privacy and domesticity, Blaustein challenges her readers to rethink and remake suburban space.

Moving from the concrete history and theory of suburbia to literature, essays by Timothy Aubry, Michael P. Moreno, and Kristin Bluemel all investigate the role of suburbia in twentieth-century literature. Timothy Aubry's "John Cheever and the Management of Middlebrow Misery" focuses on the critical reception and larger social functions of Cheever's suburban fiction. As he puts it, a critical reevaluation of Cheever means moving beyond a view of suburbia as "an unredeemable homogeneous wasteland," and Aubry does just this by carefully contextualizing Cheever's fiction in its historical situation and offering carefully nuanced readings. Michael P. Moreno's "Consuming the Frontier Illusion: The Construction of Suburban Masculinity in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*" follows a similar strategy, investigating the reception and critical implications of Yates's novel. According to Moreno, "*Revolutionary Road* denotes a moment in American history when the United States was re-designing itself into a 'new and improved' culture based on material consumption." Suburbia thus provided a way to reconcile this new conformist, consumer identity with "the mantle of freedom and independence that was quintessential to the republic's nineteenth-century

frontier image." Drawing on historical sources, Moreno helps us to rethink the masculine crisis literature of the postwar period. Finally, Kristin Bluemel's "'Suburbs are not so bad I think': Stevie Smith's Problem of Place in 1930s and '40s London" reminds us that suburban literature is neither a purely American, postwar, or prose phenomenon. As Bluemel tells us, Smith "uses her position as suburban insider to describe and analyze more acutely than others the ambivalent role of the suburb in English life." Bluemel uses Smith's poetry to focus her wide-ranging exploration of the interwar suburbanization of London, the literary reaction to suburbia in popular literature of the time, and the implications of intellectual condescension toward the suburbs. Bluemel concludes that "Smith's suburban writings challenge existing critical constructs of twentieth-century literature that privilege an urban modernism at the expense of what could be called suburban intermodernism."

The importance of technology and media to the creation, maintenance, and future of suburban spaces and lifestyles is the focus of James B. Mitchell's "Cul-de-Sac Nightmares: Representations of Californian Suburbia in Science Fiction During the 1950s and '60s" and Douglas Ruskoff's "Mediasprawl: Springfield U.S.A." Mitchell offers a striking survey of some of the most influential postwar science fiction texts, including literary works by Ray Bradbury and Philip K. Dick, as well as *The Twilight Zone* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Situating such work in the context of California's massive suburbanization, he argues that "[p]ostwar science fiction, with its satirical observations of society and inherently destabilizing, defamiliarizing narrative strategies, captures the alienating, disconnected sense of suburban synthetic communities in a way that no other cultural expression of this period approximates." He goes on to note that science fiction emphasizes the importance of media technologies to suburbia by suggesting that "'suburbananity' is at its heart a performance, the script of which can be gleaned from media culture." This insight is shared by Douglas Rushkoff in his analysis of the ultimate suburban family, *The Simpsons*. Rushkoff points out that "the Simpson family is meant as a '90s answer to the media reality presented to us in the '50s and '60s." In essence, the media strategies of the show point out, parody, and redefine ideologies of domesticity and images of suburbia from the early days of television. As he puts it, "if *Father Knows Best* was a hopeful projection into the future, *The Simpsons* is what actually came to pass," for it is really a program about suburban television viewers in a dialogue with the programs that make up such a large part of their history. Like science fiction's use of the fantastic to point out the role of ideology and simulacra in suburban everyday life, *The Simpsons* takes advantage of animation's freedom from the constraints of realism to make deadly serious points about suburban life and media culture.

Peter Clandfield's "Canadian Films and Understated Critiques of (North) American Suburbanism" and Robert Beuka's "'Cue the Sun': Soundings from Millennial Suburbia" both examine the ways in which suburbia is represented on film and the complex interpenetration of filmic representations and lived realities. According to Clandfield, not only do Canadian films about suburbia differ from those produced in the U.S., the experience of Canada is also the lived experience of suburbanization

on many levels. Clandfield situates his extensive readings of two Canadian films, *Nobody Waved Good-Bye* and *The Suburbanators* both within the context of postwar road narratives, slacker films, and suburban criticism, demonstrating both continuities and critical possibilities in these uniquely Canadian visions of suburbia. As Clandfield notes of *Nobody Waved Good-Bye*, the film "uses the frustration and ambivalence of teenagers in the prosperous postwar suburb of Toronto to offer a critical and ironic perspective on both Canadian identity and (North) American suburban materialism and autothralldom." Clandfield suggests that those themes which defined suburban narratives in the postwar world are all evident here, testifying to Canadian anxiety about the influence of mass culture and the United States. Turning his attention to more recent films, Clandfield finds that Canada's growing diversity offers new possibilities for the suburban narrative:

> The degree to which Canada's demographics have changed since the 1960s is acknowledged in *The Suburbanators*. The cultural hybridity of contemporary Canada is strongly evident in Calgary . . . and, I will argue, links it to a view of suburban possibilities that is, in a muted and irony-laden way, more optimistic than those of either *Nobody Waved Good-Bye* or *SubUrbia.*

While Clandfield focuses on the most specific concerns of place, Robert Beuka provides a wide-ranging survey of contemporary suburban studies. He brings together a diverse array of issues and sources, offering a compelling analysis of how contemporary films such as *The Truman Show* and *American Beauty* relate to concrete issues of the definition of suburban space, the legacy of both critical and popular images of suburbia in sit-coms and postwar crisis literature, and the changing nature of contemporary suburban development. For Beuka, "'suburbia' entailed the construction of not only a new kind of physical landscape, but new psychic and emotional landscapes as well" (23). Taking account of television, literature, and film, Beuka suggests new ways for us to map both the physical and psychic spaces of suburbia.

It is our hope that the articles assembled here will make an important contribution to the growing critical discourse of suburban studies. By tracing the historical roots of suburbia, its role in everyday life, its place in literature, and its representation on the screen, these articles challenge us to rethink our relationship to suburbia wherever we may live. Indeed, it is vital that we critically consider the phenomenon of suburbanization in more complex terms than the one-dimensional, populist utopia or mass culture nightmare it too often remains in our imagination. As these authors remind us, suburbia is part of our history and our future, and it is on our screens and in our everyday lives no matter where we are—its presence as ubiquitous as the mass culture of malls and McDonalds which it spawned. Indeed, we hope this issue will help us to see that suburbia, as Robert Beuka says, is "not an alien, nondescript 'noplace' lurking on the margins of the landscape and the culture, but in fact someplace far more intimate, the most profound and vexing of all environments: home."

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