

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Martin Dines (2020) *The Literature of Suburban Change: Narrating Spatial Complexity in Metropolitan America*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 304pp., £80.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781474426497.

In Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), the central character and narrator Karim Amir states: 'The suburbs were over: they were a leaving place' (Kureishi 1999: 117). Indeed, the dialectic of centre and periphery has always implied a devaluation of the latter, not only in terms of representation (Ashcroft et al. 1994: 88-91), but also with regard to power relations. If we were to follow Derrida's insight into hospitality, we would say that suburbanites long for the centre, and when they finally have the chance to move in, its inhabitants de-limit 'the *very* place of proffered hospitality and maintain authority over it' (Derrida 2000: 4). Martin Dines's new monograph *The Literature of Suburban Change: Narrating Spatial Complexity in Metropolitan America* (2020) aims to dismantle this idea of the suburb as a transient and dehistoricised site: 'The suburbs, I contend, are conceptualised in late twentieth-century writing both as being in process across time and as places which have accumulated significant histories' (2).

The book includes five chapters, a coda, and a well-informed introductory study, which first and foremost specifies the body of work Dines is keen on analysing, namely literary and cultural material – heterogeneous in genre – regarding metropolitan America, produced after the 1960s. Then, by taking his cue from both Yi-Fu Tuan's *Topophilia* (1974) and Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness* (1976), Dines traces the theoretical assumptions behind our understanding of the suburbs as rootless and timeless: on the one hand, continual mobility is addressed as the main reason why people are not able to feel attached to a place anymore; on the other hand, suburbs are conceived of as spaces waiting to be embedded in the main metropolitan area, thus they are 'merely a stage in the process of urbanisation' (5). Instead, Dines agrees with Doreen Massey 'in demanding that space be conceived in ways which foreground its multiplicity, its ongoing production, and its interactions across various scales' (14-15). In other words, Dines puts forward the idea that, apart from the undeniable connection with the centre, suburban spatiality can be meaningful on its own and foster multifarious literary representations.

The first chapter focuses on two novel sequences: John Updike's Rabbit novels and Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe books. The former is analysed through three figures – sector, transect, and rhythmic nostalgia – which brilliantly render its spatial complexity, since 'each one is more dynamic than the last and more capable of appraising spatio-temporality in critical ways' (35). This theoretical framework – which stands at the crossroads of literature and geography – proves Dines's study to be truly interdisciplinary, just as literary geography demands (Hones 2014: 7-8; Tally 2021: 319). As for Richard Ford's sequence, Dines zooms in on the 'previous-resident returns' (78), that is to say how

different people experience – across time – the same domestic environment. Moreover, at some point (70), there is a fascinating reference to Frank Bascombe’s newly-discovered disease – prostate cancer – which changes his being-in-the-world. In my view, Dines could have elaborated on this issue by intertwining spatial and corporeal vulnerability (Butler 2016: 19). On the whole, these two novel sequences reflect on the diachronic development of suburban spaces and places: rather than producing a solidified image (24), they depict suburbs as changing through time, thus opening up to a revision of the past which stands between a memory-based – *à la* Benjamin – and a place-based politics (31).

Along with the novel sequence, in chapter two, Dines examines three stand-alone Gothic novels: Anne Rivers Siddons’s *The House Next Door* (1978), Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* (1985), and Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides* (1993). He draws on the previous scholarship on suburban Gothic in order to distance himself from those critical stances which expect revelation and confirmation from the Gothic narrative (e.g. Murphy 2009). Specifically, Dines calls for a viewpoint which sees the Gothic as an uncanny means ‘to destabilise commonplace understandings about space and place’ (86). Put another way, he strongly believes that Gothic devices aim to historicise the suburbs: for instance, in Siddons’s novel, the reference to Native American spirits haunting a modern house hints at the fact that the site was previously inhabited.

Apart from the novel, and all its variations, Dines offers an overview of other literary forms telling suburban stories, namely: memoir, graphic narrative, short story cycle, and theatrical productions. In chapter three, besides the temporal dimension, he wonders about whether the memoir enhances a shared – rather than individual – story of the suburbs (127). Examples are taken from David Beers’s *Blue Sky Dream* (1996), D. J. Waldie’s *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (1996), and Peter Balakian’s *Black Dog of Fate* (1997). Dines puts forth the compelling argument that suburbs can positively or negatively affect ‘private and shared memories and experience’ (160). And yet, the chapter lacks granular references to related issues of trauma and disability, which are at the core of most memoir and life writing (Luckhurst 2008; Couser 2018). Moreover, when dealing with Armenian ethnicity in Balakian’s memoir, the assumption by which ‘second and third generations appear to unite in disavowing the ethnic attachments of the first’ (132) might have been expanded on, by looking at other ethnic enclaves. Indeed, if we were to consider the Italian American experience in the US, we would see that third-generation descendants developed a different attitude, since they did engage with the so-called ‘ethnic recovery’ (Tamburri 1991: 20; Tricarico 2018).

Whereas the previous chapters move between the analysis of inner and outer spaces, chapter four is concerned with the forms domestic space might take in graphic narratives. By adopting Lefebvre’s conceptualisation of space as socially produced (162), Dines concentrates on two main case studies, namely Chris Ware’s *Building Stories* (2012) and Richard McGuire’s *Here* (2014). What makes Dines’s study remarkable is his attention to the formal features of the works he is examining: for instance, Ware’s is a non-linear graphic narrative in the sense that it does not trace spatial evolution diachronically; this feature accords with the book format because it is not issued as a single bound book, but ‘as a box containing fourteen separate printed elements in a variety of formats’ (204), hence ‘it is impossible to decide their precise and final arrangement’ (205). This serves Dines’s argument about the active role of the individual in the decentralisation – across time and space – of these narratives: in other words, the historicisation of suburban domestic spaces is an ongoing and

contingent process, which is achieved by ‘disrupting the linear proceedings and the presumed present tense of comic strips’ (206).

If compared to the novel sequence, the short story cycle of chapter five reflects a similar construction of space, since they both include autonomous and interdependent elements. According to Dines, this literary form is especially apt to render an image of the suburbs as incomplete because ‘after turning the final page of a cycle’s concluding story, readers are typically left with a partial, conflicted view of a fictional world’ (209). Dines observes that, more than any other genre, the short story cycle is characterised by a metafictional layer, which empowers the characters who can hereafter write back to the master narrative and ‘take on responsibility over the long term for narration and memorialisation of their own environments’ (210). Specifically, Dines examines Pam Conrad’s *Our House* (1995) and John Barth’s *The Development* (2008), while drawing on Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1957) as well as on his students’ invaluable feedback during a course he taught on the suburbs in American literature (229).

Lastly, Dines offers a glimpse of theatrical productions engaging ‘with histories of post-war suburbanisation’ (235): Marc Palmieri’s *Levittown* (2006), Lisa D’Amour’s *Detroit* (2010), and Bruce Norris’s *Chybourne Park* (2010). This coda helps the author reaffirm his aim: to show the openness of the suburbs, against a backdrop of fixed and dehistoricised representations. Overall, Dines’s monograph adds significantly to the scholarship of suburban spatiality, due to his theoretical insights – that could be applied to any other Anglophone and non-Anglophone literary representations of suburbia – and the wide range of texts examined, which demonstrate that there is not a singular suburban story to be told and that, despite Karim Amir’s statement at the beginning of this book review, ‘the suburbs [...] are here to stay’ (247).

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