

NON-SUBJECTS AND POST-INDIVIDUALS:  
THE NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY IN THE POSTMODERN AMERICAN SUBURB

by

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B.A., Dickinson College, 2008

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Comparative Literature

2012

This thesis entitled:  
Non-Subjects and Post-Individuals: The Negotiation of Identity in the Postmodern American  
Suburb  
written by Lacey N. Smith  
has been approved for the Department of Comparative Literature

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*The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.*

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Non-Subjects and Post-Individuals: The Negotiation of Identity in the Postmodern

American Suburb

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Karen Jacobs

Suburban studies, particularly with regards to literary analysis, has only recently been recognized as an analytical space in its own right rather than as a peripheral space within urban studies. Through close readings of both Danielle Dutton's *S P R A W L* and Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, this essay investigates the ways that the suburb functions as a type of postmodern space, specifically focusing on the implications such space poses for notions of identity, individuality and subjectivity. In this essay, I employ Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, Fredric Jameson's theory of postmodern hyperspace, Deleuze and Guattari's theory of multiplicity, and Marc Augé's theory of non-place to illustrate how this new form of identity is linked with the social character of space which dictates normativized living practices and creates an impetus towards the maintenance of a so-called social homeostasis within the suburban spaces of postmodernity.

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my mother Elena, whose tireless support and love have always kept my dreams afloat.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I owe a debt of gratitude first and foremost to my advisor, Dr. Karen Jacobs, who went above and beyond to assist me with clarifying my ideas and organizing my thoughts throughout this project. I would also like to thank committee members Dr. Mark Leiderman and Dr. Beverly Weber for the guidance and expertise they provided me throughout this process. In addition, I am eternally grateful to the friends and family who supported my pursuits—in particular Erica Carley and Jeffrey Bellomi, who assisted with editing, and Matthew Loewen, Kathleen Krebs, Michael Putlack and Stefan Berteau, who provided morale support through many of my growing pains and sleepless nights. I would also be remiss if I did not acknowledge the support I have received from the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Colorado at Boulder, in particular Graduate Program Assistant Patricia Paige, whose persistent efforts and gentle reminders saved me many bureaucratic headaches throughout this process. Finally, this idea of the suburbs as a space for literary analysis (which had been gestating within my other academic projects for years) would never have crystallized in the form of this project had it not been for the music of Arcade Fire, whose album “The Suburbs” touched me in ways I’d long forgotten possible.

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*Let's take a drive through the sprawl  
Through these towns they built to change  
And then you said "The emotions are dead:  
It's no wonder that you feel so estranged."  
Arcade Fire, "Sprawl I – Flatland"*

## Introduction

To talk about the suburbs is to talk about space. In particular, to talk about the American notion of the suburbs is to talk about a space that is often burdened by a set of ideals, clichés, and stereotypes which are collectively shared by a people, the vast majority of whom experience this space as home and yet associate with the word “suburb” a subset of impressions and ideas which often have little to do with their own experiences. While the academic study of the urban landscape is not new, the notion of the suburbs as a space in its own right and not merely as a peripheral extension of urban space has only recently received the academic attention it deserves. This is arguably a result of the 20<sup>th</sup> century emergence of postmodernity,<sup>1</sup> of which the contemporary form of suburban space<sup>2</sup> is a result. That the suburban experience is linked with the postmodernity is not surprising if one considers that both the idea of the contemporary American suburb (as suburbia) and postmodernity are linked by the post WWII period as the era which created the conditions for their mutual emergence. In postmodernity, the earlier bipolar conception of geographical space as merely urban or rural lacks the complexity necessary to represent a world that has expanded spatially in complex new configurations that replace such binary oppositions.

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<sup>1</sup> By postmodernity, I am specifically following Fredric Jameson's definition of postmodernity as the era emerging between 1945 and 1973 in which capitalism expanded to a new form multinational or late capitalism, the effects of which penetrated everyday life (Jameson xxi). I will analyze the cultural effects of this emergence later in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> While the suburbs existed long before the postwar period, the suburbs took a new form in the years following WWII. Consequently, my discussion of contemporary space should be assumed to mean the suburbs as they have existed since this shift.

It is in the postwar reconceptualization of dichotomies such as urban/rural, public/private, utopian/dystopian, homogenous/heterogeneous, and natural/constructed that the suburb emerges as a borderland, a weigh-station between such polarities. This experience of space as borderland has a similar effect on notions of subjectivity and identity, where subjectivity is defined as autonomous individuality and self-determination. As a result, the contemporary suburban experience contributes to the development of notions of identity which are located in between the seemingly dichotomous distinctions of subjectivity and objectivity. The suburban spatial experience in postmodernity is accompanied by a concomitant renegotiation of identity and subjectivity which changes the way individuals relate to one another and to space itself. Subjects become not objects, but non-subjects, and the result is a new postmodern identity, which I will call the *post-individual*, which is an intermediary between humanist autonomy and the fully multitudinous postmodern human.

In this essay, I analyze suburban space in relation to notions of identity and subjectivity, with a particular focus on the American concept of the suburbs as suburbia. I will investigate the way suburbia functions as an idealized notion of the postwar suburban experience while expounding upon spatial concepts surrounding the type of space commonly referred to as the suburb. This is not only because the literary texts I analyze are both set in the United States, but also because the American suburb seems to function in a way which is distinct from global articulations of the suburban experience.<sup>3</sup> I focus my analysis on two different novels which are indicative of the contemporary American suburban experience: Danielle Dutton's *S P R A W L* and Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*. Though these novels seem to offer disparate

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<sup>3</sup> An exhaustive study of global differences in suburban experience would no doubt be a worthy endeavor, but one which is impossible given the spatial limitations of this particular project. Consequently, any reference to the suburb or suburbia within this essay should be assumed to mean the concept of the American suburb which develops in the period following World War II and which is the basis for most contemporary discussions of American suburbia.



approaches to the concept of the suburb, both texts illuminate a key theme of suburban literature which will be the primary focus of my analysis—the concept of the suburb as a produced space which imposes standards of community upon the formerly autonomous individuals who find themselves within that space, and the way in which this imposition creates new forms of identity which alter previous notions of subjectivity.

Specifically, I seek to illuminate the methods by which individuals within these produced spaces<sup>4</sup> create and adapt to implicit community standards, as well as how suburban space is produced with the encouragement of this social development in mind. I will also clarify how individuals submit to these social practices, resulting in adaptations which alter subjectivity and contribute to the creation of interchangeable non-subjects. By interchangeable, I mean bodies which may differ on surface or stylistic levels but whose function to space is universalized, allowing these bodies to substitute and replace one another without changing the composition of the space they inhabit. This adaptation is a postmodern experience, and I will employ in my analysis of the suburbs as postmodern space four theorists whose theories ground subjectivity in the material spatial relations and practices of which they inseparably are a part: Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, Fredric Jameson's theory of postmodern hyperspace, Deleuze and Guattari's theory of multiplicity, and Marc Augé's theory of non-place. I use these theorists to illustrate how this new form of identity is linked with the social character of space which dictates normativized living practices. My discussion of the literary treatment of suburban space in Dutton's and Eugenides' works will interact with a recent crop of literary theorists addressing the portrayal of the suburb in literature, most notably Robert Beuka and Bernice M. Murphy, because they specifically focus their analysis in postwar American literature. This essay

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<sup>4</sup> Here, I employ the term “produced space” as used by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*, which I will highlight later in this essay.

represents an attempt to inject new modes of literary analysis into an academic space which has, until recently, often been dominated by non-literary fields. Ultimately, my essay will link discussions of postmodern space with the relatively new investigation of literature within suburban studies, in order to show how postmodern theories of identity relate to and are representative of the spatial experience of living in the contemporary American suburb.

### Defining the Suburban Space in Literature

The expansion of literary criticism into suburban studies is a relatively recent development. Texts on the topic, such as Robert Beuka's *SuburbiaNation*<sup>5</sup> and Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue's *The New Suburban History*, tend to demonstrate that theorists have only recently departed from the notion of suburban studies as secondary to urban studies in general. Beuka explains: "While critical attention seems equally divided between the urban milieu favored by humanistic geographers and postmodern place theorists and the rural/wild places studied by ecocritics, suburbia, with a few notable exceptions, has remained until quite recently a critically forgotten place" (Beuka 11). This may be at least partially because, until recently, postwar suburbanization was regarded merely as "the most recent stage of urban development" (Kruse and Sugrue 5) and not as a spatial development in its own right. Further, investigations which do focus on the suburbs have tended to come from fields such as Geography, Sociology, Anthropology, and Political Science, while the Humanities have tended to neglect the discussion of suburban space except as it relates to urban studies. Tellingly, the word suburb seems to lack a definition which is universally accepted among academic fields, and tends to only be definable in relation to the definition of urban space. The result has been the relative subordination of

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<sup>5</sup> The fact that Beuka's book was not published until 2004 indicates the relative newness of this field in literary studies, as it is difficult to find texts which focus on the suburbs from a literary perspective, rather than from the viewpoint of fields such as anthropology, sociology, geography or urban studies.

suburban studies to overarching investigations of space which have primarily focused on urban and rural distinctions and which have until recently regarded suburban studies as merely an extension of urban studies.

Conversely, suburban studies which do assert the spatial autonomy of the suburb often fail to account for the city at all. As Kruse and Sugrue write:

Just as most urban histories left the suburbs out, few suburban histories discussed central cities at all, except through the rear-view mirror of those fleeing urban life...As important as the first generation of suburban community studies have been, their inward focus most often obscures the larger social, political, and economic processes that reshaped modern America. (4-5)

In this study of suburban space, I aim to divorce discussion of the suburbs from discussions of urban space in general without entirely erasing the importance of the contributions urban spaces made to suburban development in the first place. I also retain the stance that understanding how suburban spaces interact with their urban counterparts is critical to understanding suburban space in general. In an era as complex as the postmodern, polarities such as urban/rural are reductive and inadequate, and must be countered with an evaluation of the continuums that exist between such polarized distinctions. The suburb must be understood as a distinct type of space in its own right, but a space which is constantly subject to interaction and confluence with the spaces that remain outside of it. The various suburban studies texts which I employ here are united in their assertion that suburban space provides an experience that is distinct from urban or rural landscapes, and must be evaluated as such.

Beuka's *SuburbiaNation* is one of only a few contemporary texts within suburban studies which comprehensively investigate the suburb from a literary perspective. Specifically, Beuka

analyzes how the concept of the suburb has maintained a central position in American literature and film since the postwar period. In *SuburbiaNation*, Beuka highlights how suburbia and suburban life have come to represent the prototypical American experience in postmodernity. He writes:

The suburban landscape...stands as the material counterpart to specific drives and tendencies in American culture apparent from postwar years onward: a massive expansion of the middle class, a heightened valorization of the nuclear family and consequent reification of gender identities, a trend—both utopian and exclusionary in nature—toward cultural homogenization, and a collapsing of the distinction between public and private spaces. That is, the suburban landscape that developed in the decades following the end of World War II both reflected and facilitated these tendencies, emerging as a symbolic manifestation of the values and contradictions of dominant U.S. culture. (2-3)

Beuka's evaluation of postwar American culture and suburbia's relation to it is an astute one. In particular, his recognition of the simultaneous utopian and dystopian associations assigned to the concept of suburbia illuminates the dualistic nature of suburban space which is dominant in many contemporary texts on suburbia. Most importantly, Beuka recognizes that the era following World War II and continuing into the present has included an increased production of literary texts addressing the concept of the suburbs and that "the explosion [of such texts] over the past half century has immeasurably altered the ways Americans think about place and their individual and collective relationships to it" (2). That is, the profusion of texts discussing the dilemma of identity and the spatial experience of suburban life in postmodernity is itself indicative of the compounding effects of that dilemma on the contemporary cultural landscape. It

is worth noting that this increase in representations of the suburban experience is not limited to literature but is observable in other contemporary mediums such as film, photography, television, and music. In this way, the experience of suburbia represents not only a theoretical change in the discussion of the American experience, but a concrete change in the way Americans actually perceive their own experiences of the spaces in which they live.

Implicit in many narratives on the suburbs, including both literary texts investigated in this work, is a discussion of the suburbs as homogenizing and conformist. Though many such discussions seem reductive at first blush, the notion of conformity is a nuanced one when one considers the connection between the suburbs as a material space and a superficial, idealized imagination of the American suburban experience as suburbia. On one hand, this ideal vision of suburbia likely developed as a result of the portrayal of suburban space in media and cultural texts, which contributed to a collectively maintained simulacrum of suburban space that is now known as suburbia. But on the other hand, this notion of suburbia as a utopian ideal developed at least partially because the post-war impulse towards suburban migration came not only from a desire for prosperity but also as a response to an urban lifestyle regarded as increasingly dangerous, chaotic, and uncontrollable. Thus, the ideal suburb was conceived as a space separate from and impenetrable by issues commonly associated with urban disorder, and one in which social dynamics could control or limit any issues which might nonetheless arise. The post-war rethinking of suburban space was, in this way, also an attempt to create a community model which limited the possibility of individuals encountering assumed dangers such as violence, crime, poverty, sexual deviance and racial tension.

To some extent, this model of community isolation did materialize in the American suburbs, though primarily because of exclusionary laws and various exercises of bureaucratic

power which limited access to the suburban landscape along racial, class and social lines.<sup>6</sup>

Suburban theorists note that these exclusionary practices and tendencies were justified as a necessary component in the production of spaces which would foster the development of community. While the postwar explosion and reconfiguration of the suburban landscape may have constituted “the development of an environment predicated on exclusionary principles and the rigid control of both physical and social landscapes,” these developments were disguised as “a strong utopian impulse toward establishing community” (Beuka 8). This utopian impulse continues to justify practices which sequester the middle-class (and predominantly white) to the suburban space, even as issues of race and class inequality slowly break down along with the relative homogeneity of the suburban landscape.<sup>7</sup> However, there is also a sense that some of the issues often regarded as urban were and continue to be exacerbated by the development of the suburbs because it created a series of boundaries which concentrated urban issues in the city.<sup>8</sup> That is, after the postwar suburban migration, space became more dramatically delineated and the socioeconomic imbalances between urban and suburban space became more noticeable. These imbalances had the added effect of accelerating the impact of socioeconomic issues in instances where the boundaries of the suburb are breached and the urban trickles into the supposedly protected suburban environment (Beuka 10). In order to maintain the illusion of the suburb as the ideal space, these breaches must be counterbalanced by an imposition of social

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<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this essay, I will not delve too deeply into the sociological divisions at work in the isolation of suburban space from race and class, at least partially because these issues have been discussed at length in many sociological investigations of suburban space. Suffice to say that these divisions are present and require their own academic analysis far more wide-reaching than the space of this essay allows. However, further investigation of these concepts is the primary subject of Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue’s book *The New Suburban History*, which I have cited in this essay.

<sup>7</sup> Here I mean homogeneity in the strict sense of racial and class sameness, not as I will also use it throughout this essay to indicate the homogenization of individuality and subjectivity for which the suburban experience has often been criticized.

<sup>8</sup> This particular concept is dominant in many texts on the suburbs as told from the perspective of urban studies.

standards geared toward maintaining the façade of order. Perhaps more importantly, because all deviations from suburban normativity tend to be attributed to these breaches, deviations which occur because of the experience of suburban life (that is, from within the suburban space) are disregarded as anomalies and ignored or repressed, a theme which will form the primary tension in the plot of *The Virgin Suicides* and which will remain an undercurrent within *S P R A W L*.

Related to this dynamic is the vision of suburbia as a space which, against all expectation, actually breeds disorder—a theme common in many artistic portrayals of suburban life. Here, I use the term disorder to signify the appearance deviations from those normativized social behaviors which are viewed as imperative to the maintenance of the idealized suburbia. The maintenance of suburban order, in the sense of the maintenance of standards which limit the impact of such urban issues as crime and violence, provides a foil for disorders which do arise from within suburban space. That is, suburbs provide a superficial form of order which disguises any danger or disorder that internally emerges in response to their specific social and material forms of organization.

This theme of hidden disorder is particularly prominent in works of the Suburban Gothic genre, a subset of Gothic literature described by Bernice M. Murphy in her book *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*. Murphy examines how Suburban Gothic works are premised on the presumption that suburban space is a space of isolation and safety which is impenetrable by outside dangers. She summarizes this assumption as “...the firm belief that things like *that* (be ‘that’ some kind of supernatural incident, serial murder, family massacre, or the opening of a subterranean hell mouth) simply shouldn’t happen in places like *this* (‘this’ being a specifically suburban neighborhood)” (Murphy 1). Suburban Gothic themes are a direct

reflection of the undercurrent of disorder, ostensibly provoked by the transition to postmodernity and the social and structural changes of the postwar period. As Murphy clarifies:

The trope of the peaceful-looking suburban house with a TERRIBLE SECRET within is one so familiar as to have passed into cliché. It reflects the fear that the rapid change in lifestyles and modes of living which took place in the 1950s and early 1960s caused irreparable damage, not only to the landscape, but to the psychological state of the people who moved into such new developments and broke with the old patterns of existence. (2)

This notion of disorder often manifests itself, even in works outside of the Suburban Gothic, as a feeling of estrangement or isolation from one's suburban surroundings. This estrangement may ostensibly be attributed to the way that the imposition of community identity contributes to the dissipation of aspects of individuality; this change is often described as suburban conformity and homogeneity.

The Suburban Gothic functions by exposing how disorder often comes from within the suburban space, rather than outside, where the assumed danger lies. "In the Suburban Gothic, one is almost always in more danger from the people in the house next door, or one's own family, than from external threats" (Murphy 2). Works which draw from the tropes developed within the genre exhibit portray the maintenance of suburban order, as well as the attribution of disorder to the urban or otherwise external landscape, as a practice which superficially screens the disorder which lies beneath the surface of the suburb itself. Extrapolating the effects of this tension is the primary concern of many contemporary works on the suburbs. In my discussion of *The Virgin Suicides*, which I would argue is a Suburban Gothic novel, I will expand on these themes at length, but it is also worth noting that while *S P R A W L* is not a Suburban Gothic novel so much as a formally experimental novel, it still engages with the concept of suburban



order as a force which limits individual autonomy, and it is through this particular theme that these novels find their primary conversation with one another. Perhaps most importantly, the aspect of the Suburban Gothic which is illuminated by both novels is the way in which this assumed protection from danger and disorder is attributed to space itself. The suburban community does not find safety and reassurance in the development of social dynamics but instead attributes to the actual space of the suburb the qualities of isolation which should (and in the Suburban Gothic, always fail to) limit the intrusion of outside disorder into their idealized space.

### Suburban Space, Postmodern Theory and Individual Subjectivity

I wish to ground my discussion of *S P R A W L* and *The Virgin Suicides* in several influential theories on space, particularly postmodern space, which together provide a powerful lens through which to analyze how these novels reflect the lived experience of the American suburb in postmodernity. These postmodern theories are based in the discussion of produced spaces, articulated by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*, as spaces which are constructed in order to facilitate particular social actions between individuals. The explanation of produced spaces seems to imply that the social experience of space is accompanied by some kind of exertion of power on the part of space itself. However, space must not be considered to have agency because, as Lefebvre insists, “space is neither subject nor object” (92) and consequently “is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things (objects and products)” (83). Space cannot exert power so much as provide a particular set of relations to which individuals within a space are subjected. Because Lefebvre argues that space is produced in conjunction with particular social functions, then space can also be produced to enact particular social behaviors

and relationships, which imbue the space with a certain social character. Lefebvre speaks of the “social character of space” as “those social relations that [space] implies, contains and dissimulates” (83), and thus produced space can be said to exert power over individuals within it not because of any agency on the part of space itself but because of the social character those spaces are produced to enable. In this way, produced spaces can be said to use social character to produce social behaviors and in so doing, produce particular types of individuals or identities.

Lefebvre’s discussion of produced space as imposing particular social relations and behaviors is reiterated by Edward Soja’s discussion of an “instrumentalized ‘spatial planning,’ which increasingly penetrated into the recursive practices of everyday life” (49). There is little argument that the suburbs are a produced space which instrumentalizes spatial planning.

Suburbs, at least in the postwar American context, are still regarded as planned geographical spaces which are spatially arranged so as to be conducive to the production of various notions of community. The prototypical idea of suburbia still does not deviate much from initial models like Levittown<sup>9</sup> as planned communities arranged in grid-like formations with certain degrees of architectural similarity. Suburban images like the cul-de-sac, the gated community, and the subdivision are all examples of planned spaces which are indicative of this idea, and portraits of suburbs from an aerial review tend to reveal carefully plotted neighborhoods arranged in symmetrical patterns. Suburban sprawl is not a naturalized expansion but is unambiguously a type of produced space.

Lefebvre argues that the increase in produced space corresponds with the advancement of capitalism to include new modes of production (102-103), a point which Fredric Jameson echoes

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<sup>9</sup> Here I am referring to Levittown, NY, a planned community founded by William Levitt in the late 1940s, which is one of the best known examples of a planned suburban community in the postwar period and which has been the model for many planned communities in America since.

in his explication of the emergence of postmodernity in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson proposes that the postmodern is a period of human adaptation necessitated by a new composition of global socioeconomics concomitant with the emergence of a “systemic modification of capitalism itself” (Jameson xii), which Jameson calls late or multinational capitalism. The emergence of postmodernity represents the expansion of late capitalism not only into space, but to all aspects of everyday life. Jameson believes that to discuss postmodernism in any context is also to discuss late capitalism as it has expanded since the postwar period, and that cultural production within postmodernism is inherently linked to mass culture.<sup>10</sup> This is because “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally” (Jameson 4) and the result is a world in which the experience of everyday life, even the assumedly cultural or aesthetic aspects which shape that experience, is always at one and the same time an interaction with the socioeconomic conditions of late capitalism.<sup>11</sup> The result is “the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” (Jameson 9) which penetrates every aspect of life within postmodernity.

While Jameson’s heavy reliance on the connection between postmodernity and the development of late capitalism seemingly minimize social aspects of postmodernity, his evaluation of late capitalism as a contributing factor in the increased profusion of produced spaces and the concurrent spatialization of social experience in postmodernity is particularly

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<sup>10</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s conception of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is an example of this, though perhaps more poignantly articulated for this instance is Fredric Jameson’s article “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” which details how Adorno and Horkheimer’s Culture Industry has expanded to mass culture in postmodernity.

<sup>11</sup> While this may seem like a sort of circular logic in which late capitalism in the form of globalization seems like both the cause and effect of the emergence of postmodernity, it is important to note that both shifts were actually effects of WWII and the change in cultural climate as well as the increase in industrial production that occurred as a result. They are linked historically to this period rather than causally to each other.

important for understanding suburban space. Jameson suggests that the emergence of postmodernity corresponded with a modification of built or produced space like those described by Lefebvre, which in turn affected the way individuals experience space. As Jameson writes, in postmodernity, “it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism” (Jameson 16). With the emergence of postmodernity, space became the dominant context shaping individuals’ cultural and social experiences. This change necessitated that individuals’ adapt from a humanist understanding of identity as rooted in individual autonomy to new notions of postmodern identity, idealized in the notion of the posthuman.<sup>12</sup>

It is around this point that Jameson builds his theory of postmodern hyperspace as a space which representationally mimics the new spatial dimensions of the postmodern world. Hyperspace, much like suburban space, is a produced space which instigates particular social adaptations on the part of individuals within it. Jameson suggests that the experience of being within hyperspace triggers the necessary process of acclimation which transforms the former high modernist individual into a new postmodern body. He writes:

I am proposing the notion that we are here in the presence of something like a mutation in built space itself. My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen in this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject. We do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace, as I will call it, in part

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<sup>12</sup> The posthuman may be conceived as Jameson’s idealized version of the postmodern individual as a body which has developed the navigational and perceptual techniques required in order to understand postmodern space. It has since expanded, under theorists such as Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway, to a more technological conception of identity as a movement beyond merely biological bodies.

because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism. The new architecture therefore - like many of the other cultural products I have evoked in the preceding remarks - stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible dimension. (Jameson 38-39)

Hyperspace must not only mimic the spatial dimensions of a postmodern world but also must facilitate individuals' adaptation to postmodern bodies which correspond with new postmodern identities. In suburban space, as in other forms of hyperspace, adaptations imposed upon individual bodies contribute to a diminution or mutation of subjectivity which makes individuals not objects, but no longer subjects—they become *non-subjects*. This non-subjectivity is a precursor to the necessary adaptation of individuality which will result in new postmodern notions of identity.

Further, Jameson writes, “to this new total space, meanwhile, corresponds a new collective practice, a new mode in which individuals move and congregate, something like the practice of a new and historically original kind of hypercrowd” (40). This hypercrowd, which I would call a collective or *community identity*, replaces the humanist notion of the autonomous individual<sup>13</sup> without entirely erasing its nostalgia for individuality. Instead of individuality being nullified, identity presents itself as a negotiation between individual identity and community identity, regardless of the ways these categories might themselves be seen as constructed responses to late capitalism. The result is the development of the *post-individual*. In contrast to the posthuman, who is a presumptive protean subject able to completely interact with this new

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<sup>13</sup> Often referred to by Jameson as the “monad” or “bourgeois ego” (Jameson 14).

postmodern space, the post-individual is a body still in the process of adaptation to space.<sup>14</sup> The post-individual has not yet fully sacrificed his or her fantasy of autonomy and individuality, but is nonetheless subject to a community identity which governs his or her social interactions in this new kind of space. By replacing the older notion of autonomous humanist identity with a notion of identity as a multiplicity (that is, a simultaneous and complex experience of heterogeneous collective or multiple identities), one conceives of the type of post-individual identity which is in the process of adapting to the social expectations dictated by the postmodern world.

The aspect of post-individual identity which is connected to community identity might best be understood through Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's definition of multiplicity. In "Introduction: Rhizome," Deleuze and Guattari write that the movement away from autonomous identity means "to reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I" (3). In the creation of a multiplicity, individual identity (marked here by the "I") is not erased entirely, but is rendered unnecessary. This multiplicity is representative of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, a space in which the individual is only constituted by means of "subtract[ing] the unique from the multiplicity to be constituted" (6). An individual can only reconstitute his or herself by subtracting his or her unique qualities from those which correspond to community identity. Because of this, the center of identity is no longer located within the individual but instead within a dynamic community; this is why the postmodern individual is always decentered.<sup>15</sup> While individual subjectivity is not entirely nullified by the creation of a multitudinous identity, the post-individual sublates his or her

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<sup>14</sup> While the posthuman may be considered a technological construction of the ideal posthuman identity, the post-individual is the social counterpart of this adaptation.

<sup>15</sup> Marc Augé describes the entire social experience of postmodernity as the decentering of the individual from his or her sense of self. (Augé vii)

individual identity by adapting to a community identity. This adaptation may thus be regarded as a reterritorialization which locates identity primarily at the community level rather than the individual level.

This reterritorialization is reminiscent of the way identity transforms within the type of space Marc Augé calls the non-place. While Augé's non-place is not synonymous with Jameson's hyperspace, it can be regarded as another instantiation of the type of space Jameson describes. For Augé, the non-place is the one space most indicative of the postmodern experience. "Supermodernity,<sup>16</sup>" Augé writes, "...naturally finds its full expression in non-places" (109) because these non-places "bear witness...to the coexistence of distinct individualities, perceived as equivalent and unconnected" (111). This perception of equivalency, reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's multiplicity, is always at one and the same time recognizable as an assimilation of individual bodies rather than a homogenization of individuality. Within the non-place, individual identity is subsumed and consequently, subjectivity is diminished. Augé suggests that the non-place is generally always a place of transit; he uses airports, train stations, rest stops, and grocery stores as his primary examples throughout his argument. Upon entering or exiting these spaces, the individual experiences a solitude that divorces the individual from his or her identity. Augé's transitory non-places are "spaces in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality, in which only the movement of the fleeting images enables the observer to hypothesize the existence of a past and glimpse the possibility of the future" (Augé 70-71). This "emptying of individuality" within the non-place is not merely an intermediary displacement caused by travel

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<sup>16</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will discuss the non-place as postmodern space, though Augé insists supermodernity and postmodernity are not entirely synonymous with one another. As Augé writes, "We could say of supermodernity that it is the face of a coin whose obverse represents postmodernity: the positive of a negative." (25)

but is, instead, a result of the reconfiguration of the individual as an outcome of the homogenizing procedures characteristic of the non-place (Augé viii).

Unlike the transitory non-places Augé defines, the suburb is a type of non-place which is lived-in and seemingly permanent. Despite his suggestion that non-places are necessarily spaces of transit or transition, he also notes that “the possibility of non-place is never absent from any place” (Augé 86). It is likely that the type of non-place for which the suburb is an instantiation is accounted for by means of Augé’s discussion of a type of non-place which is a utopian, ideal space. As Augé writes:

Certain places exist only through the words that evoke them, and in this sense they are non-places, or rather, imaginary places: banal utopias, clichés. They are the opposite of Michel de Certeau’s non-place.<sup>17</sup> Here the word does not create a gap between everyday functionality and lost myth: it creates the image, produces the myth and at the same stroke makes it work.” (77).

These types of non-places are maintained collectively. They are transferred through cultural products (literature, media, art) which provide particular idealized images that are then shared by the collective as a standard of normativity for that type of space. This specific notion of non-place accounts for the notion of American suburbia which is linked to a series of nostalgic, cliché images and for which there is seemingly no real-life equivalent. Though individuals live in these spaces, they are inundated with cultural representations of the space which create and reinforce these idealized visions, and in turn become the basis for community standards.

In *S P R A W L* and *The Virgin Suicides*, as in many works set in the suburb, the community encourages normativized behaviors which are all linked to the maintenance of this non-real ideal. The process of maintaining this ideal might be regarded as a form of *social*

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<sup>17</sup> Here, he is referring to Michel de Certeau’s “The Practice of Everyday Life.”



*homeostasis* as a process in which deviations from normativized social activity and behaviors must be counteracted and neutralized in order to return to the so-called “normal” state of affairs reflected in the ideal suburbia. While the word homeostasis implies that seemingly “real-life” social interaction can never perfectly match the ideal society produced by the imaginary non-place, social order is imposed so that the illusion of the space as ideal can be maintained. This maintenance of social homeostasis is the force which complicates individuals’ adaptation to non-subjectivity, and is the primary theme around which contemporary narratives about the suburb find tension.

### Danielle Dutton’s *S P R A W L* and the Creation of the Post-Individual

Danielle Dutton’s 2010 novel *S P R A W L* is an experimental novel written in the form of a stream-of-consciousness narrated by a woman living in the suburbs. The format of the text does not include any paragraph or line breaks but is instead situated as 140 pages of double-spaced block text. The narrative does not follow a traditional, chronological plot, and is primarily composed of the narrator’s own experiences of suburban life interspersed with generalized statements which are ostensibly collective ideas about suburbia. Though the text is primarily narrated in the first person singular, Dutton’s narrator frequently switches between “I” and “we” within the prose to exhibit how her own feelings and thoughts are indicative of sentiments shared by the community. Further, Dutton’s narrator is given neither a name, nor any definitive physical characteristics. The one exception is that she is feminized and, in some cases, sexualized, but these traits are assumedly not specific to her but to suburban woman in general,<sup>18</sup> and do not individualize her in any way. The ambiguity of the narration style combined with the form of the

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<sup>18</sup> Issues of gender and gendered space are central to Dutton’s narrative. For brevity, I have not expanded upon them here, but there is a wealth of material in *S P R A W L* for investigating questions surrounding gendered subjectivity and gendered space.

text emphasizes the fluidity between the narrator's own thoughts and the thoughts of a generalized suburban community of which Dutton's narrator is an embodiment. Consequently, with the exception of a few self-conscious articulations demonstrating how she is conscious of her own (albeit diminished) subjectivity, Dutton's narrator becomes interchangeable with any other suburban individual in her suburban space.

In *S P R A W L*, this characteristic of interchangeability is true not only for the narrator, but for every character within the narrative. As the narrator remarks, "the whole town is interchangeable" (Dutton 88). With the exception of Haywood, the narrator's presumptive husband, and Lisle, the narrator's sister who is only mentioned in memories of the narrator's childhood, no character within the narrative exhibits any individualizing traits. Instead, they are interchangeable portraits of what a suburban neighbor might be. Dutton draws the concept of interchangeability into focus by exposing how individuals within suburban space lose some semblance of their subjectivity and become similar to objects. To recall, I understand interchangeability as a mechanism which functionally utilizes non-subjects as objects in space without nullifying the individuality of their form. While suburban individuals' identities as subjects (in the autonomous, humanist sense of individuality) are not destroyed, they are sublated by notions of community identity, rendering their bodies object-like without completely detaching them from subjectivity. That is, at least as far as the function that these bodies play in space is concerned, they can be manipulated as virtual objects are without fully becoming actual objects. One might say that these bodies can be called non-subjects. Because the experimental form of the novel precludes the development of a traditional plot, these embedded arguments about subjectivity are waged primarily through form and tension within the narrative is created by juxtaposing the narrator's internal sense of autonomous individuality with her adaptation to

and endorsement of normativized suburban behavior and community identity. In *S P R A W L*, Dutton brings the concept of interchangeability into conversation with notions of subjectivity in order to illuminate how subjectivity is affected by the experience of the suburb as lived space.

Dutton's exposition of American suburbia emphasizes how within suburban space, individuals experience a sort of unintentional submission to norms regarding suburban living and social practices which are dictated by the community. The sense of community employed here is spatial in that it is localized; it relates geographically to the neighborhood surrounding the individual, rather than to overarching notions of collectivity rooted in the individual's particular characteristics.<sup>19</sup> The spatial experience of community relates to simultaneity, in that individuals are related to others in the community by their simultaneous experience of that space. As the narrator in *S P R A W L* writes, "I never really meant to be born at such and such a time with such and such habits; but I was raised during the last fifty years and trained to match my outfits to the décor" (Dutton 28). Here, the experience of space is not explicitly geographical. This passage reflects Augé's suggestion that space itself is "eminently abstract" because "it is applied in much the same way to an area, a distance between two points (a two-metre 'space' is left between the posts of a fence) or to a temporal expanse ('in the space of a week')" (67). Individuals are subjected to the experience of suburban space and are shaped by living in that space, but space applies simultaneously to the geographical sense of place as to the experience of a particular era or span of time as a space.

While time may seem to be an important element of this experience, it is not important in the sense of implied progress and change so much as the experience of a particular era or moment as a chronological space. Dutton's narrator was raised during the last fifty years, and

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<sup>19</sup> Here, I mean collective in the sense of all individuals who share a particular trait or characteristic, regardless of the spatial arrangement of their bodies i.e. distinctions like "European men".

thus her experiences are tied not only to the experience of sharing a geographic space with her neighbors, but sharing that experience during a particularly chronological space. This does not tie the experience to the historical so much as ground it in the experienced present. Both geographic space and chronological space converge to form the community space. Consequently, the individual is part of the community whether or not he or she exhibits agency in the selection of that community, and any imposition of community practices will be exacted through the community space.

This localization of community is reinforced by the way suburban space functions as a Lefebvrian produced space. As the narrator in *S P R A W L* writes, “seen from above, there is a peculiar pattern to our expansion: neighborhoods snake around supermarkets, hospitals, airports, malls” (Dutton 123). Neighborhoods are planned with regards for their proximity to centers of necessary social activity, and individual neighborhoods within the suburban community at large spatially miniaturize and localize this community experience. The produced quality of these spaces is emphasized by the way that they replace anything natural within them. In the suburbs, “we bulldoze small and inconvenient fields of strawberries or corn and replace them with the increasing complexity of everyday life” (Dutton 96-97). The narrator’s assertion that “a sidewalk cannot be accurately drawn without leaving us with a vague picture of displacement” (84) articulates the way that “the once-prevalent characteristic ‘natural’ has grown indistinct and become a subordinate feature” (Lefebvre 83) in the increased visual dominance of produced space. This aesthetic aspect of space production also imbues the suburbs with a particular degree of idealization in that the social character of the space is based on an ideal vision of how those spaces might be experienced. The imposition of social practices as normativized standards

extends to the imposition of aesthetic standards because it is on the level of aesthetics that this ideal is visually maintained.

Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the suburban lawn. The lawn is a particularly important metaphor for the suburban individual not just in Dutton's prose, but in narratives about suburbia in general. In *S P R A W L*, the narrator often shows her frustration with her neighbors by writing letters. These letters are inserted into the stream-of-consciousness prose to signify the moment of their composition, and each is written in an instructive manner as an attempt to correct behaviors which the narrator deems unfit for her neighbors to exhibit. Often these letters take on the pronoun "we" in order to suggest that they are written from the perspective of the community at large rather than from a particular individual. In one letter, she writes:

In particular, Mrs. Henry, allow me to address you on the subject of nice lawns and nice people, hardworking people, neighbors within a neighborhood, people who take care of their own lawns, etc. There are those who believe your front yard is currently implicated in several disruptive notions of 'utility, chaos, and a lack of concern for the opinions of others.' This is the kind of attitude we prefer be reserved for the backyard. In the front yard, Mrs. Henry, we aim for a distinctly American, park-like, ideological space, a classic composition in which the individual cares for his lawn for the benefit of the connectivity and industriousness of the entire community. Let me suggest that you visualize the lawns on our street as a string of priceless pearls, wherein each pearl is attractive on its own yet indistinguishable from the others. You might as well accept it. This is a major sociological locus for us and one that raises critical questions of beauty and goodness, not

only regarding landscaping but also regarding the individual who maintains his lawn as an unquestioned symbol of respect for nice people, or not. (Dutton 38-39)

In suburbia, front lawns become a spatial extension of the people who tend them, at least insofar as lawns are regarded as extensions of the individual's public adaptation to community standards designed to maintain the idealized image. While the individual may still feel free to assert his or her individuality in the backyard, the front lawn represents the individual's public identity, and as such both the front lawn and the individual it implies are expected to conform to community standards. Both the individual and the lawn must blend in to their surroundings. What is interesting is that this standard is purely aesthetic. While the maintenance of standards is equated with an individual's capacity to exhibit respect for "nice people" (perhaps best understood as being "neighborly"), the maintenance of these standards does not contribute to the development of social relations which establish community. Like the string of pearls Dutton's narrator mentions, no one lawn is perfectly identical to those surrounding it but it must exhibit a certain likeness or sameness in order to maintain aesthetic order. As Dutton's narrator later notes, "If stitched together, the lawns on this street would be pointless and unrecognizable" (103). The purpose of the lawn, like a string of pearls, remains merely decorative; it is a modification of form without any correspondent modification of function.

The imposition of community standards, such as the letters Dutton's narrator writes to her neighbors, may be regarded as a social enforcement of idealized suburban order. The case of the lawn reveals the mode by which this form of order is enforced. Community standards are only maintained because of the implicit gaze of one's neighbors, who take umbrage with any issue affecting the aesthetic order of the public space. Though an individual owns his or her lawn as an extension of his or her private property, its visibility makes it essentially public and so the lawn,

as an aesthetically public space, is subject to the standards set by the community. These standards are policed by the very individuals who must also submit to them and they are enforced under the guise of community building and mutual respect, but even where an individual enforces these standards, he or she does so with the assumed power and support of community standards. In suburbia, with some exceptions,<sup>20</sup> it is individuals acting as mouthpieces for the collective community who ensure that aesthetic order is maintained. Like Dutton's narrator chastising her neighbors for "disrupting" this order by means of "chaos," individuals are responsible for spurring collective participation in standards, even as those very individuals themselves may resist such collective adaptations. The aesthetic integrity of the neighborhood is considered to be owned not by the individual but by the community.

This fact makes the entire process seem implicitly social and locally generated, even as those standards are generated by idealized visions of community inherent in produced spaces like the suburb, which are linked to the modes of production dominant in postmodernity. This is clear because even when these standards are not purely aesthetic, they are often economic (i.e. real estate values, standards of living, etc.)<sup>21</sup> and do not contribute to the development of community from a social perspective. As the letters Dutton's narrator writes to her neighbors illustrate, the private nature of these aesthetically public spaces still allows individuals the possibility of maintaining a spatial distance from one another. Aesthetic community thus seems to be a superficial form of community which is not based in social interaction at all.

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<sup>20</sup> In many suburbs, laws exist to maintain certain rules regarding not only lawns but a variety of exterior standards. Even where these standards are not enforced by the law proper, they are often maintained by means of seemingly voluntary organizations, such as the ubiquitous Homeowner's Association. Further, most enforcement is reliant upon individuals who report their neighbors' breaches in these standards.

<sup>21</sup> Even then, some would argue that aesthetics are intrinsically tied to economics to begin with. One poorly maintained lawn assumedly brings down the real estate values of an entire neighborhood, which is why Homeowner's Associations are so militant about lawn upkeep. In this way, some might argue that these economic rationales equate with the aesthetic rationale.

Violations of community standards (such as the unkempt front lawn) are deviations from aesthetic order which are then perceived as a deviation from the social aspects of community, even though the maintenance of aesthetic order does not have a social function. This is how the individual's own community identity becomes implicated in violations of aesthetic order. (In *The Virgin Suicides*, as I will discuss later, Eugenides will reverse this effect by implying that the more unfit the suburban individual becomes, the more overtly this is reflected in his or her neighbors' outrage about an unkempt lawn.) In *S P R A W L*, the appearance of an unsightly lawn is the indicator of an individual's need to adapt to community standards. The narrator writes letters in order to encourage this adaptation in others, and they are written so as to frame assimilation as an ethical imperative. They imply that while these behaviors may not come naturally to individuals, adaptation can be produced through purposeful adherence. As the narrator writes in another letter, "Mrs. Millet, it's time you adopt a practical approach to native plants, to the aesthetic and financial requirements of residential land use, to cutting down that spruce tree and considering the greater public good... This is not a 'natural' state of affairs. Kill your pests and weeds" (Dutton 76). The implication of the individual and his or her private space in the maintenance of the so-called public good supports the vision of suburban space as an intermediary space between the opposition of public and private, often regarded as mutually exclusive.

The ambiguity of public/private distinctions is further complicated in *S P R A W L* through Dutton's discussion of the relationship between objects and notions of ownership and property. Objects, like lawns, when owned, become property, but objects which are public are owned by the community itself and thus cannot be considered an individual's property, even as he or she has access to it. Both ownership and property can be conceived as private or public, but



the individual's relationship to an object is entirely dependent on his or her perception of it as public or private property. In *S P R A W L*, Dutton shows how the relationship between ownership and property can make public/private distinctions fluid. In one instance the narrator writes, "Outside, there is a white cotton shirt in the middle of the street, twisted up with fallen leaves, which could be my shirt. It could be mine. It could have fallen out of my bag when I crossed the street. But suddenly it's trash. Suddenly it's disgusting, like a long hair on the edge of the bathroom sink" (Dutton 95-96). In this case, the acceptability of the object is entirely dependent upon the individual's perception of it as her own property. If the object is private, and therefore related only to the individual, it is acceptable, whereas the object relegated to public space is depersonalized, and even becomes abject. This abjection may be accounted for because of the implicit relationship between private ownership and imagined individual identity, particularly because the concept of use provides a connection between objects and bodies. Public use of an object depersonalizes it from the individual's body, and so public property is connected to the individual through use but not through ownership. When objects which could be private are perceived as public, they are distanced from the individual.

Dutton also expands on the way owned objects are employed to maintain the façade of individuality to which the post-individual clings, while simultaneously equating objectivity with notions of interchangeability. The narrator's space is full of privately owned objects, all of which can be manipulated and rearranged. These objects are named, enumerated, and their spatial arrangements clarified, and the narrator's private ownership of these objects allows her to make a connection between their arrangement and her perceived individuality. The narrator writes, "On the edge of the countertop, lined up along the edge, is a plastic cutting board with dried tomato pulp, a mixing bowl, a crumpled towel, a ramekin, a stack of plates, two tumblers, three spoons,

a cold saucepan, a rubber band, a portion of lemon skin, and the cap to the bottle of vinegar” (Dutton 32). This is one of many similar passages in which a particular space (i.e. the countertop) is named, followed by a list of the objects contained within that space. Sometimes, the narrator clarifies how she arranges or rearranges these objects. For example, “Back home I shift colorful fruit candies to the dining room table and line them up (yellow, green, orange or orange, green, yellow, red)...the arrangement and rearrangement of these everyday objects is comforting and has to do with human nature in the petroleum age” (Dutton 44).<sup>22</sup> These rearrangements allow the individual to reestablish his or her relationship of ownership with objects regarded as private property, but they also serve a performative function in the sense of using objects to portray a particular image of one’s identity. The entire concept of interior design revolves around the idea that the individual can personalize a space through the arrangement of his or her objects. But these arrangements and rearrangements, like the maintenance of lawns, are purely aesthetic. They provide the illusion of *compositional* change in space but never actually change the *content* of the space. The implication of these changes is that objects and their locations become interchangeable, that similar homes tend to contain similar objects and that regardless of the spatial arrangement of these objects, they do not change the experience of a space in any way beyond decoration.

Private objects provide the individual with a sense of aesthetic individuality through the illusion of choice, perceived as self-determination. But this individuality, like the aesthetic order of suburban space, is only superficial. As Jameson writes, the notion of individual style requires a centered, autonomous subject—a subject which has been displaced in postmodernity by the decentered non-subject (15). While post-individuals have not fully adapted to postmodernity and

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<sup>22</sup> The discussion of object arrangement as a feminine, domestic task distinct from the male task of object creation is clarified by Iris Marion Young in the chapter “Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy” from her book *House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme* (1997).

are thus unwilling to abandon the illusion of autonomy, their status as non-subjects cannot protect the post-individual from the continued imposition of the imperative to adapt, dictated by the social character of produced space. Post-individual identity might thus be regarded as the negotiation that this adaptation sparks between the individual's imagined autonomy and the community identity which space is designed to produce. This negotiation cannot be resisted or avoided; it occurs despite the individual's opposition to it.

During certain moments within *S P R A W L*, the narrator recognizes how her sense of individuality seems increasingly superficial, but she continues to maintain the illusion of autonomy. As the narrator writes, "I am transparent like a membrane, or like a building made of glass with the gates left open. Still, each day is touched by loving lists of mundane objects. I make all sorts of ordinary choices." (Dutton 69) The suggestion that objects relate to superficial notions of choice and style<sup>23</sup> as expressions of individuality is reinforced by the narrator's discussion of how individual identities in the suburban space are merely a construction of traits and products mediated by mass culture. She writes, "I am absorbed into a place where people make themselves up out of certain images or mediated public phenomena. I lose control of my speech and am forced to disentangle myself from organized group activities" (Dutton 108). This sense of being absorbed into place is indicative of how the dissipation of autonomy occurs on a spatial level. Just as bodies are unburdened from their identities in Augé's transitory non-places, the suburban non-place produces a non-subject, who is compelled to adapt until he or she divorces his or herself from the illusion of autonomous individuality, which is still retained by the not-fully adapted post-individual even as the post-individual glimpses the possibility of its superficiality.

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<sup>23</sup> An assertion reminiscent of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's concept of the culture industry from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944).

In *S P R A W L*, Dutton creates a portrait of suburbia as a space which creates non-subjectivity through an illumination of how bodies within suburban space are treated as objects. Non-subjects, like objects, are spatially interchangeable. They function as placeholders within space and are necessary only as individual components of the collective known as community; that is, singular identities (as bodies) are necessary for the creation of community, but must remain collective in order to function as community. Consequently, like the aesthetic order imposed on the front lawn, non-subjects develop a particular degree of likeness with each other and with their environment: they match, they blend in, they belong to the environment, and they can be manipulated as objects within that environment. To borrow a term from Jameson, non-subjects have been submitted to a flatness or depthlessness (9) which removes much of their subjectivity, but which still allows a modicum of surface difference which masquerades as individuality.

A useful metaphor for the non-subject is the Lego man figurine. Like other Lego blocks, Lego men can be snapped into place within a variety of Lego-built environments, and can be manipulated just as easily as the Lego pieces which create that environment. They are interchangeable with other Lego objects but are some of the only pieces which communicate their form (human shape) through surface details. They are used to communicate that the constructed environment includes a social component, that is, that it is inhabited by human beings in social arrangements. This may be a hyperbolic explanation of the way non-subjects function in suburban space, but fundamentally, individuals stripped of subjectivity essentially become bodies which are interchangeable with other similar bodies. If a family moves out of their home, another moves in and assumes roles and engages in activities that, on their face, repeat those exhibited by the family they have replaced. Each individual is a placeholder within

his or her community. Bodies are used to construct an environment in which “people” are a necessary component of the spatial experience but these bodies are no longer autonomous subjects. This superficial form of community subsumes individuality in the creation of non-subjects in order to create the interchangeability which is a key component in the maintenance of that community.

Like the objects enumerated by the narrator, individuals in *S P R A W L* are reduced to non-subjects through the narration of their trajectories through space. I use the word trajectory because, unlike a route or path, the trajectory is a mode of spatial representation unmarked by time or the concept of a journey. A trajectory reveals its beginning and ending point simultaneously, eliminating time as a necessary component of its clarification and presenting the entire possibility of movement in flattened form. While subjectivity is connected to choice and variability, and thus might be more adequately represented spatially by the journey, objects placed in motion follow trajectories. In Dutton’s novel, bodies are not subjects but non-subjects—as such, their paths through space can be marked as trajectories. “I turn left, then right, then left again, right, left, and then I go straight for quite some time, and then I take a right, another left, a right, and then I’m home: driveway, garage, linoleum, a flight of stairs, a river leading west, south, south-east, east. It’s so old-fashioned, a memory, unimportant events” (Dutton 43). The narrator writes of the paths she routinely takes so as to expose these trajectories as repetitive and predictable, rather than as variable individual experiences. As opposed to marking a historical path which is entirely subject to sudden changes and which suggests at least a modicum of potential variability, the trajectory suggests an invariable path that will be taken by a particular object when set in a particular motion. It is more concerned with the movement of the object within a space as movement in itself than as an exposition of how that particular

movement is taken. Even when trajectories are read as a sequence of events (chronological), the fact that they are repeated in a seemingly infinite loop removes the usefulness of chronology from their explanation.

The notion of trajectory also communicates an image of flatness, in the sense that the journey divorced from time is reduced to entirely spatial dimensions. Consequently, it mirrors the way that the individual, divorced from subjectivity, is reduced to spatial function. In Dutton's novel, this flatness is portrayed as the individual becoming one with his or her habitat. As Dutton's narrator writes, "I am visually integrated into my domestic background by color, scent, and shape. In some sense I'm madly in love, or I'm transformed into a kind of habitat, or I match the wallpaper with my eyes" (Dutton 41). In *S P R A W L*, this flatness is exhibited not only by the narrator, but of every individual within her space as well. Even individuals with whom she has ostensibly developed a personal relationship, such as Haywood, are interchangeable with any other non-subjective body and reduced to their roles within that space. Of Haywood she writes, "...his appearance in another room is like the appearance of an appropriated subject. In this way Haywood might as well be sitting at a table in someone else's still life, with fish bones and a box of apple juice or an empty shaker of salt" (Dutton 112). The metaphor of the domestic scene as a still-life painting is a useful one, because it is yet another instance in which the interchangeability of non-subjects functions similarly to the interchangeability of objects. One need only imagine still-life paintings populated by a profusion of dissimilar objects arranged within a space to understand how this interchangeability works. Any one of those objects (assuming that, like the private objects in Dutton's suburban space, they exude a degree of functional similarity) could be replaced with another without altering the painting in any fundamental way beyond aesthetic composition. In Dutton's suburban space, this is also true of non-subjective bodies.

Dutton's narrator relates this flattening of individuals through non-subjectivity to generational shifts associated with suburban living, ostensibly referring to the postwar transition to postmodernity. She writes, "...despite our muscular physiques we are possibly even flatter than the previous generation, casting shadows on walls while playing with a kiwi skin or the tab from a can of soda. I can't decide if my shadow is on the wall or glued to the wall. I'm almost stripped of emotional weight. Therefore, I'm a model vision" (Dutton 58). The transformation of the individual into a non-subject contributes to the creation of a "model vision," an idealized postmodern identity. This idealized postmodern identity is the product of the idealized (and postmodern) suburban space. This tendency towards flattening, which I would argue is better understood socially as an act of blending in, allows individuals to maintain their imagined individuality without disrupting the order of community. Just as the lawns must blend in with their environment, the non-subject is engaged in an adaptation toward social equilibrium which prevents any non-superficial digressions from community norms. This type of equilibrium is of the sort which I have previously called social homeostasis, in which differences are allowed privately but are controlled publically in order to retain a general balance (an issue further complicated by the interpenetration of public/private distinctions). Any anomalies or deviations from the community standard of normativity must be counteracted and diffused in order to return to social homeostasis, or the idealized suburban order which the production of suburban space as an imagined Augéian non-place is meant to create.

Though Dutton's narrator struggles throughout *S P R A W L* with her status as non-subject and the imperative to adapt, ultimately, she represents a successfully adapted post-individual identity. While she experiences the negotiation of her identity through this adaptation as a form of estrangement, she also exhibits an acceptance of this estrangement as inevitability.

This is reflected in her discussion of how she sees herself and the others around her as becoming increasingly virtual.<sup>24</sup> She writes:

The book calls it ‘suburbanizing the conventional inner city,’ and argues that it is ‘excessively intentional.’ But this place is a flat surface. This place is distinct from other places and at the same time isn’t. This place is really convenient. There are all sorts of differences that already exist. The book tells us we resemble virtual neighborhoods and according to experts the virtual is ‘more compelling’ than we are. (Dutton 97)

The use of “we” to describe the spatial neighborhood as inclusive of the virtual non-subject signals that the narrator has successfully adapted to her space. Dutton’s narrative actually shows how suburban post-individuals can be and are produced by suburban space. In *The Virgin Suicides*, Eugenides will demonstrate how this same process can result in failures which exacerbate the disorders that lie under the surface of superficial suburban order. While *S P R A W L* portrays how individuals successfully (albeit sometimes begrudgingly) adapt to postmodern notions of identity, *The Virgin Suicides* provides a problematization of this process and shows what happens when this process of adaptation fails.

### Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides*: Social Homeostasis and the Problematization of Identity Adaptation

Jeffrey Eugenides’ 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides* is the story of five teenaged sisters whose untimely suicides shock and confuse the suburban community<sup>25</sup> in which they grew up. It

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<sup>24</sup> The use of “virtual” harkens back to the image of the posthuman as a sort of cyborg identity.

<sup>25</sup> Ostensibly Grosse Pointe, Michigan, though this is never stated explicitly in the novel.



is a Suburban Gothic<sup>26</sup> novel written in the first person plural and narrated by a group of similarly aged boys who were particularly affected by the suicides, at least in part because they lived on the same street as the girls their entire lives and grew up wondering about the secrets of the girls' private lives. The narrative is designed as an explanation of the boys' collective observations surrounding the girls' suicides throughout year in which they occurred (sometime in the 1970s), supplemented by information the boys have been collecting in the twenty or so years since the suicides in an attempt to understand why the tragedy occurred at all. While the plot mentions some of these boys by name, the number of narrators remains unclear because they speak in a single pluralized voice.<sup>27</sup> Reliant upon the Suburban Gothic trope that things like *that* can't happen in the suburbs, the entire arc of the novel is contingent on the presupposition of suburban safety which is bound up in the vision of the suburbs as isolated from an outside world of danger and tragedy.

The novel begins with the suicide of the youngest sister, 13-year-old Cecilia Lisbon, who kills herself a full year before her sisters do. Her first attempt to slit her wrists in the bathtub fails and is followed, after a few short weeks of forced socialization and social non-acknowledgement of her accident, with a successful attempt in which Cecilia throws her body out of a window on the second floor of her family home and impales herself on the fence below. The novel does not hide the fact that it will end with the eventual suicides of the remaining Lisbon sisters, and in fact is framed in such a way as to pose Cecilia's suicide as the starting point of a long-term degeneration of the Lisbon family and the surrounding community in general. The tension within

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<sup>26</sup> Murphy acknowledges how the novel might be read as a Suburban Gothic novel, but does not actually expand on how in her own work. "In this study I have elected not to include a specific chapter on the literary Suburban Gothic as seen in the world of Joyce Carol Oates, Alice Sebold, A.M. Holmes, Jeffrey Eugenides et al. While such a study would undoubtedly prove to be a very rewarding enterprise, its parameters are so broad and its contexts so varied that to do the subject justice would require another book in itself." (Murphy 13)

<sup>27</sup> In Sofia Coppola's 1999 film adaptation of the novel, she portrays this group of boys as having four members, though the narration within the film is all conducted by a single voice, played by Giovanni Ribisi.

the novel is provided by the immediate awareness that the novel will end with the suicides of the remaining sisters. Like the trajectories in *S P R A W L*, the narrative in *The Virgin Suicides* is less concerned with plot so much as a narrative exposition of a trajectory; in place of a chronological development leading to a climax is a retelling of a tragedy which has already occurred and cannot be avoided. It is a journey which reveals its beginning and end points simultaneously.

Cecilia's death also illuminates the complicated continuum between public and private implicit in suburban life, which becomes a primary theme in the novel. Everyone in the neighborhood knows what happened to Cecilia because her death was a public one—her body is found in the front yard of the Lisbon home and the suicide occurs while the Lisbon family is hosting a party in their basement. The guests who were swiftly ushered out of the home each got their own glimpse of the girl's lifeless body, and the incident was visible to anyone with a view of the Lisbon home. The narrator's reflect on how, in the moments right after Cecilia's death, despite the gravity of the situation in front of them, the neighborhood surrounding the Lisbon home appeared to remain unaffected. "No one else on our street was aware of what had happened. The identical lawns down the block were empty. Someone was barbecuing somewhere. Behind Joe Larson's house we could hear a birdie being batted back and forth, endlessly, by the two greatest badminton players in the world" (Eugenides 33-34). The suicide, rather than serving as a disruption, seemingly goes unnoticed in the moments of its occurrence and consequently appears to remain a private event.

Thus, the tragedy only reaches the status of public myth through the repetition of the event in gossip, recollection, and conjecture. Tellingly, though the event takes place in a seemingly public space, it is in the private whispers behind closed doors that the public takes possession of it as their own. This is in spite of the fact that, under the guise of tact, most of the

neighbors go out of their way to avoid mentioning the tragedy to the Lisbon family—an act which is matched by the family's own desires to keep their suffering private. As the boys note: "After they returned home, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon shut themselves and the girls in the house, and didn't say a word about what had happened. Only when pressed by Mrs. Scheer did Mrs. Lisbon refer to 'Cecilia's accident,' acting as though she had cut herself in a fall" (Eugenides 14).

However, this respect for the family's privacy is not maintained between members of the community, who in private discussions raise a variety of conjectures about how the tragedy occurred. Often, because the tragedy indicates the kind of violence which the implicit safety of suburban space is supposed to prevent, these discussions take the form of blame-placing. Most often, the neighbors implicate Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon as responsible parties by suggesting that Cecilia's psychological problems are an anomaly which must have been caused by her parents' inability to properly acclimate her to societal norms. The narrators write:

Everyone had a theory as to why she had tried to kill herself. Mrs. Buell said the parents were to blame. 'That girl didn't want to die,' she told us. 'She just wanted out of that house.' Mrs. Scheer added, 'She wanted out of that decorating scheme.' On the day Cecilia returned from the hospital, those two women brought over a Bundt cake in sympathy, but Mrs. Lisbon refused to acknowledge any calamity. (Eugenides 17)

While the Lisbon family seeks the solitude and privacy of their home so as to deal with their tragedy in secret, their marked insistence on not directly addressing the suicide attempt actually contributes to the gossip and rumors about the details of its occurrence. Even the narration can be construed as this type of conjecture. The narrators' reconstruction of the tragedy is entirely based on their own observations and theories regarding the incidents surrounding the suicides. The boys have spent years interviewing neighbors and collecting the girls' discarded objects from the

Lisbon's trash, but these techniques only allow them the possibility of authoring a vision of the Lisbon girls which is adjudicated by their outside perspective. Rather than being told from the perspective of those who suffered, the retelling is entirely contingent upon the public image of the girls.

Further, the assumption that tragedies such as teen suicide cannot occur in the ostensibly safe space of suburbia allows the neighbors to justify their insistence on placing blame for the tragedy. Because they cannot accept the possibility that Cecilia's disorder originated within their idealized suburban space, they must relegate the tragedy to an anomaly, or some seeming rupture in normativized social practices. The suburban tendency towards social homeostasis requires that the tragedy be counteracted by normativized behavior. This is why the Lisbon family refuses to acknowledge the suicide publically, and also why the neighbors attempt to fool themselves into believing that the tragedy can be explained away; they cannot accept the possibility that the occurrence is indicative of an underlying community disorder. The tragedy is glossed over by social niceties intended to communicate a social form of community while simultaneously enforcing social order by triggering an impulse to sweep the issue under the proverbial rug. The joint agreement between both sides—the neighborhood women on one end, reducing the tragedy to dark humor in order to soften its gravity, and Mrs. Lisbon's quiet non-acknowledgement of abnormality on the other—is an attempt to drain the tragedy of its dangerous qualities. Like the lawns in Dutton's novel, abnormality (in the form of tragedy) is suppressed because of the threat it poses to community order.

This brings us back to the aforementioned lawn metaphor. Within the text, the Lisbon house itself is the only object which refuses to conform to the rigid aesthetic order of the surrounding suburb. From their retrospective vantage point, bearing in mind the various ways the

home would give way to disrepair over the months following Cecilia's death, the narrators note that prior to the first suicide, the Lisbon home was as tidy and orderly as the houses that surrounded it (Eugenides 5). However, the deeper the Lisbon family retreats into the interior of their home over the course of the narrative, the more notably the exterior of the house falls into disrepair. Over the course of months, "the house receded behind its mists of youth being choked off, and even our own parents began to mention how dim and unhealthy the place looked" (Eugenides 145). While the family's retreat within the home marks an attempt to keep their private lives private, the degeneration of the house publically betrays the crumbling foundation of the family's fortitude and morale. For the outsiders looking in on the family, the house is the public artifact which serves as a constant reminder of how the neighborhood has been blemished by the tragedy. Easy enough to ignore when the aesthetic integrity of the house remained, the tragedy cannot remain repressed so long as the house continues to needle everyone with the reminder of its existence and to keep the Lisbon's suffering public. The harder the house makes it to ignore the tragedy, the more intolerant the neighborhood becomes of the family's inability to move past the tragedy and return to normativized social behaviors. Empathy for the family dissipates as soon as their withdrawal from the community makes social homeostasis impossible. It is no surprise, then, that when Mr. Lisbon loses his job as a teacher at the high school, it is the house which is implicated as a sign of the man's demise. As the narrators write, "Parents had begun making complaints shortly after Cecilia killed herself. They maintained that a person who couldn't run his own family had no business teaching their children, and the chorus of disapproval had grown steadily louder as the Lisbon house deteriorated" (Eugenides 162). It is not merely the suicide which is regarded as a blemish upon the perfectly manicured neighborhood, but the house itself becomes an eyesore which must be dealt with.

In one instance, when the family fails to address the disorder of their aesthetically public space, the community takes matters into their own hands. Under the guise of charity, members of the community remove the fence on which Cecilia impaled herself. This is justified first by the dangerousness of the fence and the threat it poses to community safety, personified in one neighbor's insistence that "our kids could jump on it, too" (Eugenides 53). The neighbors justify this ostensibly illegal trespassing into the Lisbon's private space by arguing that the fence is partially on another neighbor's property, rendering it partially owned by that neighbor. "It turned out the fence stood on the Bates' property. Mr. Buck, a lawyer, negotiated with Mr. Bates about the fence's removal and didn't speak to Mr. Lisbon at all. Everyone assumed, of course, that the Lisbon's would be grateful" (Eugenides 53). This action, in addition to reflecting the same fluid relationship between public and private ownership of property illuminated in *S P R A W L* by the shirt in the street, also renders the Lisbons' private space borderless. The community's removal of the fence is a symbol of the ways that the community has already breached the borders surrounding the Lisbon family's privacy.

As in the incident with the fence, the neighbors in *The Virgin Suicides* act as a single entity. Though individual neighbors are sometimes named, the implication is that each person speaks for the collective sentiment of the community. Consequently, like the characters in *S P R A W L*, the neighbors and community members in *The Virgin Suicides* become interchangeable with one another. This sense of collective voice is reiterated by the first person plural narration. Not only are none of the boys narrating the novel given a recognizable individual voice, but also the collective nature of the narration reflects the collective nature of the community response to

the tragedy. Further the Lisbon sisters are generally addressed as if they are a singular entity.<sup>28</sup> Often, the narrators simply refer to them as just the “girls” without attaching the Lisbon name to the group. Additionally, as the title of the novel suggests, their suicides are judged as a collective action. Even though Cecilia’s suicide occurs much earlier than those of her sisters, the reflective vantage point from which the boys narrate the novel reduces the year between the tragedies to a single occurrence. This is yet another way in which the novel functions as a form of trajectory, in that the other sisters’ suicides at the end of the novel appear to be merely a completion of an action which began with Cecilia and to which the other sisters, in their unity as a group, were always and inescapably going to submit.

A major plot element which develops throughout *The Virgin Suicides* is the way in which the narrators eventually come to understand that the girls are in fact separate entities, each with individual personalities, but that they are separate entities whose allure is entirely based in their existence as a collective. After Cecilia’s death, the boys write, “Then...our eyes got used to the light and informed us of something we had never realized: the Lisbon girls were all different people. Instead of five replicas with the same blond hair and puffy cheeks we saw that they were distinct beings, their personalities beginning to transform their faces and reroute their expressions” (Eugenides 25-26). But even in this realization, they still refer to the girls as “the Lisbon girls”—a single unit of multiplicity. For the boys narrating the novel, the girls represent the sort of multitudinous individual and community identities which I argued were embodied in *S P R A W L* as a form of post-individual identity. While they can see certain surface differences which distinguish the girls from one another, none of these features are more than a surface illusion of individuality. The girls remain collectivized in their status as a group. Like their

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<sup>28</sup> The arguable exception to this would be Lux, whose promiscuous behaviors throughout the novel set her apart from the boys. But even then, this is because Lux may be considered the mouthpiece for the collectivity of the girls, not because she is regarded as a singular entity separate from her sisters.

fellow community members, the boys cannot separate the girls from their existence as a unit and so, consequently, they cannot return them to their status as subjects in order to understand them as individuals, despite the fact that they seem to think that doing so would somehow reveal the key to the mystery the suicides pose. The boys seem to think that the psychological rupture which occurred for the girls is linked with the girls' estrangement from their subjectivity, which has been forever taken from them by their status as non-subjects in a non-place. This theory contributes to the boys' reflective sense of helplessness at being unable to prevent the inevitable tragedy of the suicides.

However, the boys also attribute to the girls a set of traits which somehow make them exempt from the process of post-individual adaptation to which they are expected to submit.

They write:

We knew that the girls were our twins, that we all existed in space like animals with identical skins, and that they knew everything about us though we couldn't fathom them at all. We knew, finally, that the girls were really women in disguise, that they understood love and even death, and that our job was merely to create the noise that seemed to fascinate them (Eugenides 43).

In this passage, the boys recognize that the girls were submitted to the exact same sort of community experience that they were, but they also believe that the girls have some sort of understanding or awareness which is far beyond their own. The boys see the girls' resistance to the dissipation of subjectivity as giving the girls a higher level of perception, and their attempts to understand the girls read also as an attempt to see things the way the girls saw them. This is how the boys eventually begin to look at their suburban experience through a new pair of eyes



and in doing so, realize how the idealized environment maintained for them by their community seems superficial.

This is particularly noticeable when the boys note the objectionable behaviors of their parents and recognize the disparity between their own responses to the tragedy and those of their parents. “We realized that the version of the world they rendered for us was not the world they really believed in, and that for all their caretaking and bitching about crabgrass they didn’t give a damn about lawns” (Eugenides 55). Towards the end of the book, after the girls have died, the boys feel a sense of estrangement from their community because they feel that while they continue to suffer the effects of the tragedy, the community has moved on, writing “We began the impossible process of trying to forget about them. Our parents seemed better able to do this, returning to their tennis foursomes and cocktail cruises” (Eugenides 231). Seen from the perspective of the community, the remaining suicides are almost a relief because they complete the tragedy so that it can be forgotten and social homeostasis can finally be achieved. While the others were able to return to their normal lives by rendering the tragedy innocuous, the boys are unable to reach equilibrium with the tragedy, and they reveal that their years and years of searching for answers (of which the book itself is ostensibly a product) have been an unsuccessful quest to reach that equilibrium. In the end, after enumerating the objects they have kept as evidence of the girls’ existence, they write “We haven’t kept our tomb sufficiently airtight, and our sacred objects are perishing” (Eugenides 246). Consequently, the boys’ willingness to finally forget the girls is the act which allows them to finally submit to their post-individuality.

## Conclusion: Expanding the Literary in Suburban Studies

Both *S P R A W L* and *The Virgin Suicides* provide iterations of how the experience of suburban space is reflected in the explication of postmodernity as an era marked by new spatial experiences which contribute to the dissipation of subjectivity. The relative approaches they take—in the first, an experimental rumination on the suburban experience of adaptation and in the second, a Suburban Gothic problematization of the danger implicit in that adaptation—represent two sides of an endeavor into suburban literary studies which retains nearly limitless possibilities for expansion. As the spatial study of the suburb continues to be legitimated by its integration into various disciplines, a number of questions should be raised and investigated for the contribution they provide to contemporary understanding of culture and social interaction. These questions include but are not limited to: How can the order created by idealized suburban space be analyzed along social or class delineations? What role does gender and domesticity play in the analysis of this space? How does American suburbia compare with non-American configurations of suburban space? How has the shift from the original reconception of suburbia in the postwar period changed since the economic stagnation of the 1970s? How has it changed since the end of the Cold War? Both *S P R A W L* and *The Virgin Suicides* provide a space through which to make tentative speculations toward answering these questions, but as Beuka indicated, the number of representations of suburban space has only increased in recent years and the integration of these analyses will be an essential part of understanding suburban space in the contemporary period. Further, analysis of these questions and questions like them can be expanded through integration of theories like Lefebvre's produced space and Augé's non-place, which will ultimately play a role in the development of new theories of spatial configuration in tune with the changing landscape of cultural and social experience.

Some other recent American novels and works that provide alternative investigations of subjectivity in suburban space and could be useful in expanding on the questions I raised above include Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, and films like *American Beauty*, *Secretary*, *I Heart Huckabees* and *The Truman Show*. Additionally, notions of suburban disorder have found a particularly fruitful home in the development of television programming, most notably programs such as *Desperate Housewives*, *Weeds*, *United States of Tara*, and *Six Feet Under*. Two different photographers (Todd Hido and Gregory Crewdson) have built their careers around investigating the undercurrent of disorder and other-worldliness which pervades suburban spaces. Finally, the recent profusion of suburban storylines set in the nostalgic golden age of suburbia (ostensibly the 1950s and 1960s) seems to reflect a contemporary impulse to investigate current suburban disorder through the lens of its origin point. This is particularly noticeable in recent film adaptations of older suburban novels (as in the case of Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*), original films such as *Pleasantville* and *Tree of Life*, and television shows such as *Mad Men*.

An undercurrent of many of these works, including the works I have discussed here, is the idea of youth as the last bastion of subjectivity before the transition to non-subjectivity identity. While *The Virgin Suicides* explores this concept through the exposition of the adult's attempts to protect their children from danger, many works on the suburbs (including those mentioned in the previous paragraph) also contain subplots centered on children's attempts to navigate the suburban world without yet being fully adapted to post-individual identity (Sally Draper in *Mad Men*, Jane Burnham in *American Beauty*). Other works suggest that the nostalgia which some individuals feel for their suburban childhoods is simultaneously nostalgia for the subjectivity that has been subsumed because of their adulthood transition to non-subjectivity.

One work that is particularly interesting on this topic is the album *The Suburbs* released by the band Arcade Fire. The album also inspired a short film by Spike Jonze, entitled *Scenes from the Suburbs*, which portrays a suburban community that, when suddenly infiltrated by war and violence, forces the children within the community to prematurely transition to adulthood, evoking a nostalgia for their lost childhood. These two examples are particularly interesting because both the album and the short film based on the album are indicative of a fairly recent expansion of modes of cultural representation to include new forms, such as the music video or the multimedia collaboration.

Ultimately, the concept which links suburban studies and postmodern theory is and will continue to be space. Spatial studies provide a common ground across various disciplines where questions like those I have analyzed in this essay may be probed, deconstructed and investigated. Few would argue that the world is the same as it was directly following World War II, but the changes set in motion by this period have evolved individuals and the social interactions between them in such a way as to obfuscate completely the path these changes have followed. Postmodernity requires an investigation of the spatial and the present as iterations of social experience that have been shaped by the socioeconomic climate of late capitalism known as globalization. It is in the suburb that these global fluctuations are played out in miniature, where the experience of postmodern identity changes the individual locally in order to create a new identity uniquely manipulatable in response to the new global climate, and where the dominant machinations of spatial order are first practiced on the unsuspecting individuals who find themselves in this postmodern age.

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