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While reading Cheryl Cowdy’s *Canadian Suburban: Reimagining Space and Place in Postwar English Canadian Fiction*, I was transported back to my adolescence in Etobicoke, a suburb of Toronto that was amalgamated into the city in the late 1990s. The settings and themes that Cowdy unearths in fiction resonated with my memories of growing up on the fringes of Canada’s largest city: a landscape of houses with finished basements, apartment towers, malls, ravines, and highways, permeated by feelings of alienation and a desire for escape. The book elicits personal reflections because of its emphasis on coming-of-age narratives, as well as the author’s own suburban origin story. Yet despite the apparently common longing of suburban youth to find themselves elsewhere, Cowdy’s return to suburbia in its literary guises uncovers an unexpectedly rich and diverse terrain for investigation.

Now an associate professor in the Department of Humanities at York University, Cowdy grew up not far from where I did, in suburban Meadowvale, part of the city of Mississauga. *Canadian Suburban* opens not with a work of fiction but a circa-1978 bird’s-eye-view painting of Meadowvale by Tom McNeely, which appears on the book’s jacket. Its foreground of realistically rendered winding streets, single-family houses, apartment buildings, trees, and parks yields to an increasingly denser and more impressionistically rendered urban fabric in the distance. On the horizon rises the Toronto skyline, “as if the city is the periphery to this planned community” (p. xii). The painting’s centering of Meadowvale, casting the country’s biggest city as its “periphery,” mirrors the book’s focus on the suburban experience as represented in English Canadian fiction since the 1960s.

The suburbs, for Cowdy, are not just a place but also a collective state of mind, an imaginary that “haunts Canadian literature and culture” (p. xii). The author engages with diverse disciplines in
her analyses, including urban history, geography, critical theory, psychology, and anthropology. She finds potential in studying literary representations of suburban environments to better understand their cultural significance, referring to and contributing to an emerging field known as suburban studies.[1] Despite the abundance of suburban imagery in Canadian fiction, however, Cowdy argues that these places have been neglected in literary scholarship. The study of literature has been more attuned to landscapes regarded as more characteristically “Canadian,” such as small towns, inner cities, the prairies, the wilderness, or “the North.” Yet about two-thirds of Canada’s population resides in suburban areas: as historian Richard Harris wrote in 2004, “Canada has become a suburban nation.”[2] Nevertheless, the suburbs are maligned as placeless, standardized, and stifling. In Canadian Suburban, Cowdy reexamines this stereotypical view, revealing a more sophisticated cultural understanding of suburbia. Rather than simply a non-place, it is liminal, contradictory, and often ill defined, located between nature and city, homogeneity and diversity, “peril and possibility” (p. 17).

The book is organized, roughly chronologically, in two parts with a total of seven chapters. The two parts correlate the experiences of fictional protagonists to the historical development of suburbs in Canada, a temporal division that Cowdy takes from geographer R. Alan Walks.[3] Part 1, “Postwar Inner Suburbs to 1970,” looks at suburban representations in novels by Margaret Laurence, Richard B. Wright, Margaret Atwood, and Barbara Gowdy published between 1969 and 2003. These works share a sense of the suburbs as a psychological space, one whose labyrinthine qualities and distinctive vistas—such as from high up in an apartment tower surrounded by open space—might evoke, or provoke, characters' inner journeys. The first chapter, “The Lady of Limbo and the Weekend Man,” looks at representations of femininity and masculinity through different suburban typologies in Laurence's The Fire-Dwellers (1969) and Wright's The Weekend Man (1970). In her analysis of protagonists' experiences in the detached, single-family dwelling and the apartment tower, respectively, Cowdy also considers the mediating role of technologies, such as automobiles and television, chiefly through the thought of Marshall McLuhan. The next chapter, on Atwood’s Lady Oracle (1976) and Cat’s Eye (1988), looks at the influence of suburban settings in female artist coming-of-age narratives. In particular, it pays attention to the role of ravines as the “subconscious” of the suburbs, in contrast to what Atwood has called “the conscious electrified life of houses,” a compelling phrase that Cowdy uses in both the chapter title and epigraph.[4] The final chapter of the first part, “The Bomb Is Only a Metaphor Now,” examines two of Gowdy’s novels set in generic suburbs, characterized by the thwarted attempts of their young protagonists to escape. As a whole, the narratives examined in the first half of Canadian Suburban cast the older inner suburbs as places of estrangement and danger, but also as productive landscapes that shape protagonists in particular ways, often through their rejection of the suburban values imposed on them.

My sense of familiarity as I read these initial chapters was no doubt related to my own adolescent environment, a circa-1970 townhouse complex close to two ravines but with easy access to the urban core. I had also read Lady Oracle and Cat’s Eye as a young adult, and the sheer cruelty of the novels’ bullying scenes, hidden from view in suburban ravines, were seared into my memory. Yet my feelings of recognition were most heightened by Cowdy’s focus on the suburbs of Toronto, the setting of all but one of the novels examined in the first half of the book. I found myself wondering whether there is something particular about Toronto that makes its suburbs feature so prominently in literature. This emphasis no doubt comes from the city’s size and the fact that it is home to many writers, as well as Cowdy’s own geographical location. Yet it also brings up ques-
tions around what is generalizable and what is specific in understandings of suburban places.

A conventional understanding of the suburbs is that they are indistinguishable from one another, teetering between comforting familiarity and disorienting sameness. Articulating a “Canadian suburban imaginary” involves particularizing the suburbs and, as Cowdy writes of one novel, “gestur[ing] insistently to the specificity of place” (p. 4). The national scale of Canadian Suburban thus seems provisional, sketching an incomplete map that is heavily focused on the most populous region of the country. Cowdy acknowledges, in a footnote, that she has “yet to find sustained English-language literary treatments of suburban communities emerging from Eastern Canada,” while “English-language fiction from the province of Québec also tends toward the urban,” with a few “notable exceptions” (149–50n7). If the literary output of these regions is oriented toward small-town or inner-city representations, that in itself might tell us something about the urban development of these parts of the country and, more broadly, the unevenness of the Canadian suburban imaginary that the book wants to elucidate.

The second part of Canadian Suburban, “Corporate Suburbia after 1970,” discusses a wider range of authors, works, and geographical settings: again, the suburbs of Toronto but also those around Ottawa, Vancouver, and a fictional “hybrid of two conservative Alberta cities, Calgary and Edmonton” (p. 122). Although all of the literary texts Cowdy analyzes in the book “are somewhat self-conscious about their settings,” those set in post-1970 suburbia are particularly deliberate due to the outer suburbs’ greater detachment from urban centers and a sometimes cynical awareness of capitalism’s role in producing these built environments (p. 5). Cowdy finds that these novels and short stories, published between 1996 and 2017, explore the relationship between characters and their suburban settings more explicitly than the works analyzed in part 1; they also focus less on individuals and more on ensemble casts.

The first chapter of part 2, “Master Plans,” looks at Ottawa’s suburbs through Gerald Lynch’s short story cycle Troutstream (1996) and Colin McAdam’s novel Some Great Thing (2004). In these works, Cowdy discerns crises of masculinity that protagonists seek to remedy by reestablishing their masculine agency, either through “scopophilic voyeurism” enabled by the suburban environment or by gaining control over the planning and development of that environment itself (p. 80). Moving back to the suburbs of Toronto in the next chapter, “Subdivisions,” Cowdy again examines the disaffection of young female protagonists, this time in “categorically bleaker” corporate subdivisions (pp. 94–95). These works by Kelli Deeth, Lesley Ann Cowan, Elyse Friedman, and Judy Macdonald, all published around the turn of the millennium, “create a compelling psychogeography of Canadian suburbia in which the subdivision functions metaphorically to convey [how] the bodies of young women mirror the communal social body” (p. 95). Struggling with self-destructive behavior and the mental health issues of family members, these characters encounter their social and built environments as barriers to their sought-after reintegration with society. In the next chapter, “Transformative Catastrophes,” Cowdy looks west in her analyses of three works by Vancouverite Douglas Coupland and one by Calgary author Suzanne Mayr. These texts, she argues, deconstruct the suburbs through their use of “imagery, motifs, and generic conventions associated with prophetic and apocalyptic literature, as well as narratives of crisis or disaster” (p. 114). To counter suburbia’s sprawling, endless banality, these authors envision satirically catastrophic narratives that clear space for something else to grow.

The final chapter of the book, “Scarborough, Scarberia, Scarlem, Scarbistan, Scarbro,” returns to Toronto—specifically, Scarborough, which, like Etobicoke, was amalgamated into the city in 1998
—through three recent books by Carrianne Leung (That Time I Loved You, 2019), David Chariandy (Brother, 2017), and Catherine Hernandez (Scarborough, 2017). Here, the texts diverge from those discussed earlier by representing the suburban experiences of racially and economically marginalized communities. In real-life Scarborough, over half of the residents are foreign-born and nearly three-quarters are members of visible minorities. In their portrayal of challenge, kinship, creativity, and community in strip malls and apartment buildings, these Scarborough novels, Cowdy argues, “offer a vision of Canadian suburbia that is a radical departure from the stories that came before” (p. 143).

One of the most compelling strands of inquiry in Canadian Suburban—one I wish the book had pursued further—is the correspondence between suburban and settler-colonial space.[5] Though suburbs exist in other geopolitical configurations, there is something particularly congruent between the appropriation of Indigenous and rural lands in processes of settler colonization and suburbanization. Cowdy finds that this link is already being studied by suburban studies scholars in the Canadian context.[6] “To define a Canadian suburban imaginary,” she writes, “is to wrestle with the Canadian settler imaginary” (p. 6). Yet the broader theme of settler colonialism and, indeed, Indigenous characters themselves are mostly absent from her literary case studies. Cowdy’s The Romantic (2003) features scenes of settler appropriation of Indigenous culture in a children’s camp set in a suburban ravine. In Laurence’s The Fire-Dwellers, the suburban protagonist encounters a Métis character who “functions as a cautionary tale against the perils of the urban space for women” (p. 7). Only in Hernandez’s Scarborough does a Mi’kmaq family appear as a significant part of an ensemble cast. Yet Cowdy makes some significant associations between suburbia and settler colonialism, even as this dimension of the suburban experience is largely obscured in literary representations. The notion of suburbia as an ahistorical terra nullius “is a common refrain in the Canadian cultural imaginary,” she writes, quoting Noah Richler’s Literary Atlas of Canada (p. 110): “the ... conviction that the country is Nowhere has been a trait of its psycho-geography since the earliest days of its settlement.”[7]

Indigenous place names like Mississauga and Etobicoke haunt Canadian suburbs. Spoken aloud countless times a day, they are resonant indices to an otherwise fundamentally silent history and set of geopolitical circumstances. The enduring nature of settler colonialism, which Patrick Wolfe has most recognizably described as “a structure not an event,” lends it a givenness and therefore invisibility that makes it difficult to distinguish in the everyday experiences of settler suburbanites. [8] Mark Rifkin refers to this “feeling of givenness” as “settler common sense,” a kind of normalized affect that flows from geopolitical and legal configurations but is also severed from them.[9] Rifkin cites the work of Aileen Moreton-Robinson in further linking white settler sovereignty, ownership of private property, and a “sense of home and place.”[10] This connection between settler nationhood and (suburban) property can also be made trans-geographically and trans-temporally. As Laurie D. Graham states of her recent poetry collection Fast Commute (2022), for instance, “connecting the colossal ongoing ‘growth’ in southern Ontario to the settlement of the West felt important.”[11] The potential of engaging literature to further uncover how this affective state resides within suburban spaces appears quite robust.

For scholars of the built environment such as myself, Cowdy’s book offers a way to look at literature as a source for better understanding intangible and subjective experiences of buildings, cities, and landscapes. In particular, Canadian Suburban makes a significant contribution to recent scholarship on often-denigrated but complex urban peripheries, arguing for the role of the humanities in the field of suburban studies. Clearly writ-
ten and highly readable, this book will be of interest to scholars in any discipline who work on the built environment, as well as literary studies and Canadian studies. The suburbs, which compose such a large proportion of the constructed environment, appear to be entering scholarly and popular discourses with increasing frequency. The new exhibition Housing Multitudes: Reimagining the Landscapes of Suburbia at the University of Toronto is just one other recent reexamination of the suburbs that, like Canadian Suburban, treats these spaces as part of larger cultural imaginaries.

[12] Like other parts of the city, the suburbs are undergoing continuous change, not only in their physical fabric but also in how they are experienced and understood.

Notes


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