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Tiny Leaf Men and Other *Tales From Outer Suburbia*: Re-Presenting the Suburb in Australian Children's Literature.

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Abstract

This paper explores how, through word and image, Tan's *Tales From Outer Suburbia* challenges stereotypical representations of the suburban. Typically, suburban spaces have been represented as aesthetically bland, mundane, and ornamental. Tan takes these tropes and ironically re-deploys them anew, and in doing so undermines anti-suburban sentiment, which has dominated Australian literary and popular culture.

Although the notion of anti-suburbanism in Australian fiction has been well documented, its presence in children's literature has received far less attention. As a case study, *Tales From Outer Suburbia*, signals the ability of children's literature to present more positive representations of suburbia because of its inherent commitment to the socialisation of children, which is prioritised over the tradition of anti-suburbanism.

Typical representations of the suburb in Australian literature have been of a place on the periphery of culture. Classed neither as a true, gritty slum, nor as a place of vibrant culture, the suburb has been cast as mundane, bland and ornamental. As such, suburban living has been used as a source of comedic inquiry, or as the object of artistic scorn. In recent years, however, cultural geographers have started to explore geographies of home and with it, the suburb. In doing so, they have begun to position suburbia as a site with its own systems of significance and find meaning in those objects that seem ornamental and trivial. Using the theoretical underpinnings of cultural geographies of the home, which seek to examine rather than degrade suburban culture, this paper explores anti-suburbanism in literature written for adults in order to establish the means for a comparative analysis with children's literature. Using a case study of Shaun Tan's *Tales From Outer Suburbia* it is argued that Tan takes tropes of suburban representations, such as the tendency to ornamentalise space, and ironically re-deploys them in order to challenge stereotypes. In this way, *Tales From Outer Suburbia* signals the potential of children's literature to represent culturally rich suburban lives; something that literature written for adults rarely attempts, and has been met with minimal success.

The Australian literary, television and film tradition has been, and continues to be, distinctively critical of suburban living. In the 1912 play *The Time is Not Yet Ripe*, Louis Esson argued that he would rather live in a 'slum area than a bourgeois suburb [because] the slums have more character, perhaps base character, and decidedly more potentialities... people dance, and have passions, and live, in a sense, dangerously. In the suburbs all is repression, stagnation – a moral morgue' (Esson 1973, p.73). To his apparent dismay, he also found the suburbs to be an essentially feminine place where 'the male element counts for little' (Esson 1973, p.18). The ideology behind Esson's attack was based on Nietzsche's claim that to live a happy life is to live dangerously (Kinnane 1998, p.41). Thus, the suburbs have offered neither excitement nor intrigue to Australian artists and writers except as an object of ridicule or comedic inspiration.

Esson's ideology was soon adopted by cliques of artists in Sydney and Melbourne, such as the Meldrumites and the Heidelberg School (Kinnane 1998, p.41), and was disseminated through the writing of Australian authors. George Johnston's iconic novel *My Brother Jack*, which was published both in Australia and America, closely echoes Esson's sentiment when the protagonist, David Meredith, describes the local suburbs in which he played as a child:

What was so terrifying about these suburbs was that they accepted their mediocrity. They were worse than slums. They betrayed nothing of anger or revolt or resentment; they lacked the grim adventure of true poverty; they had no suffering, because they had mortgaged this right simply to secure a sad acceptance of a suburban respectability that ranked them socially a step or two higher than the true, dangerous slums of Fitzroy or Collingwood.

(Johnston 1964, p.37)

Johnston's description acts not only to denigrate the suburbs but also the people who live there. The implicit assumption is that people who live in suburbs 'mortgage' their right to expression, and that the cost of buying a suburban home is one's cultural life. The suburbs in this passage are presented as resisting true poverty, but succumbing to the mundane – a fate worse than living in a slum.

Similar disenchanting views of suburbia have been re-presented throughout the twentieth century. For the past fifty years, Robin Boyd's famed *The Australian Ugliness* has perpetuated the view that suburbia is obsessed with superfluous ornamentation, and recently celebrated this anniversary with a 'special edition' publication. Boyd suggests that 'abstract art, prefabrication, mass-production and perverted Functionalist ethics provide the moulds that shape things in Australia' (Boyd 1963, p.9). Functionalism, 'the subordination of the whole and the accentuation of selected separate features' (Boyd 1963, p.232), is according to Boyd 'gratuitous adornments known throughout most of art history as ornament, or when their lack of meaning is especially obvious, decoration' (ibid).

Similarly critical, Barry Humphries' caricatures of suburban dwellers Dame Edna Everage and Sandy Stone, and the popular television characters Kath and Kim of famed television show *Kath and Kim* are examples of the limited range of representations of suburban characters. Empirically, these characters are recognisable for their obsessions with the mundane and with ornamentation.

Dame Edna's love of the gladiolus flower formed the subject of her 1972 poem 'The Gladdy stamp', which was one poem in a series dedicated to the Australian 'postage stamp at which we so excelleth [sic]' (Humphries 1991, p113). The object of Dame Edna's affection in the poem is ironically ornamental, 'a real collector's prize' that displays 'our glories', such as the gladiolus and 'Warringah Shopping Mall' (ibid).

Kath and Kim, too, is explicitly concerned with the mundane. A blurb published on the show's website advertises the series by writing: 'Kath and Kim leave no letter unturned as they mangle syntax and find virtue in the mundane' (*Kath and Kim*, n.d.). Although produced decades after *The Time is Not Yet Ripe*, the series echos Sue Turnbull when she describes the setting as:

the living embodiment of all the worst attributes of suburbia as envisioned by Louis Esson in 1911. It is also, like Edna Everage's suburbia of the 1950s, remarkably homogeneous and apparently untouched by the politics of multiculturalism which gained official sway in the 1970s.

(Turnbull 2008, p.27)

These characters are popular, not only because they are disparaging but because they take a comedic look at Australian suburbia. On the one hand, it enables those who live in suburbs to recognise and even laugh at representations of themselves, but on the other, it is a celebration of monoculturalism as these characters are based on stereotypes of the suburban dweller and are typical of the limited scope of representation.

Esson's work, it seems, has left indelible scars on suburbia; although Australia has a long history of producing anti-suburban fiction, very little has been written specifically on its appearance in literature written for children. In a 1997 edition of *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature*, Beverley Pennell published an article arguing that 'Since the 1980s there has been a strong desire on the part of a few Australian writers to create more appropriate positive representations of contemporary Australian suburban life styles with their plural cultures and ethnic diversity' (Pennell 1997, p.38). Since the article's publication fourteen years ago, the number of authors working to re-define suburbia is still few. However, the overlooked and perhaps implicit point in Pennell's article is that children's literature positively re-signifies suburbia more comprehensively than Australian novels written for adults because children's literature prioritises the suburban setting as it is a location suitable for the socialisation of children.

In a literature review conducted as part of my PhD thesis project, over thirty of the books examined were set in suburbia, indicating that children's literature acknowledges suburbia as a significant site, both culturally, and for socialisation. The suburb, and the suburban home in particular, represents a microcosm of the greater world and therefore acts to socialise the child in the 'ways' of the larger world. The suburbs are particularly concerned with the socialisation of children because they were constructed with specific ideals about childhood and child-rearing in mind. As Alan Gilbert writes in 'The Roots of Anti-Suburbanism in Australia':

Indeed, Suburbia was from the very beginning virtually synonymous with domesticity. Suburbs were places for families and children: for the men, the 'breadwinners' returning daily, places to be husbands and fathers; for the women, places to concentrate on being wives and mothers. Suburbia was, par excellence, the great Australian habitat the production, protection and socialization of children.

(Gilbert 1989, p.35)

Rather than being in spite of, it is directly because children's literature is ideological and aims to socialise that it does not subscribe to the tradition of anti-suburbanism, and therefore makes new and positive representations of suburban populations possible. The absence of a body of work on anti-suburbanism in children's literature is because children's literature is a unique cultural practice that does not have the same paradigms as fiction written for adults. Anti-suburbanism, which ideally promotes a shift away from the suburbs, does not accommodate socialisation. Even though some contemporary fiction written for adults explores suburban living, the gaze of such authors is often just as critical as the work of anti-suburbanists Johnston and Esson.

Due to the absence of literary theory that provides a positive framework for understanding suburban imagery, the work of cultural geographers is useful in considering representations of suburban ornamentation. While the Australian television and literary tradition has afforded little significance to domestic material culture, cultural geographers across the globe have awoken to 'the rich territory of home. Doing so, they have unsettled ideas about home and domesticity by questioning what might appear to be familiar and mundane' (Blunt 2005, p.505). Alison Blunt argues that from the 1990s cultural geographers have worked to demonstrate that the domestic space is a site of culture with its own unique systems of signification. Further, cultural geographers have acknowledged that the study of domestic space is grounded in studies of 'material cultures of objects and their use, display and meanings within the home' (Blunt 2005, p.506). In other words, even the seemingly mundane, those objects rejected as superfluous ornamentation, by the likes of Robin Boyd and Barry Humphries, carries meaning.

The 'mundane presented anew' is evidenced in Shaun Tan's *Tales From Outer Suburbia*, which achieves this through a critical examination of suburban traits and ornamentation. Published in 2008, the text is made up of a collection of short stories told from within an unnamed suburb or suburbs. The title invites the implied reader to reconsider suburbia as an alien, undiscovered location. This interrogation is visually supported by two images placed at the beginning and end of the book framing the collection of short stories. The first image is of an envelope addressed 'To Paul (who enjoys a good expedition) Perth, W.A.' (Tan 2008, p.4-5). On the envelope is a collection of stamps that form the contents page. Each stamp features an image from the corresponding story and a page number. The use of stamps to guide the reader through what is implied will be a fantastical 'expedition', both by the address and the abstract images, is an interesting medium when considered in comparison to Dame Edna's previously mentioned poetry series dedicated to the Australian stamp. The humble Australian postage stamp has been mocked by anti-suburbanists for its ornamental and unnecessary display of Australian landmarks which attempt

to add interest to a purely functional object. In *Tales From Outer Suburbia*, the stamps are functional in that they form the contents, however, they are ironically also used to position suburbia as a fascinating and unexplored location.

The second image, placed toward the end of the book, is of a library return slip marked 'Public library service of Outer Suburbia' (Tan 2008, p.95), requesting that the book be returned by February 2056. This signals that the book presents a future imagining, or hope for suburban spaces. Importantly, the two images frame a reading of the book, and challenge the way that the implied reader has been positioned to read and approach suburbia. On one hand, an envelope and library return-slip are functional – they both ensure that materials are delivered to their destination; but here they allude to a magical location that is rendered possible by their seemingly mundane and practical form of envelope and library-slip.

Throughout the book, Tan challenges tropes of suburbia by depicting through word and image a surreal, fantastic location. The stories offer a critique of both suburbia and popular views of suburbia, particularly the trope that the suburbs are obsessed with the superfluous ornament of space and object. Each story in the book is about everyday happenings: pet ownership, hosting a house guest and looking after the home, but with highly fantastical elements. For example, the magical realist instructions on how to 'Make Your Own Pet' out of common rubbish declares itself a 'community service announcement' on how to avoid loneliness (Tan 2008, p.82). A series of instructional images, framed by recycled newspaper and mathematical equations, visually moves the eye through the 'practical' steps to create a 'real-life' domestic cat. In the story a young girl gathers a cardboard box, filling it with 'raw material' of 'burnt out kitchen appliances, obsolete computer parts, useless video cassettes, unwanted books' and other 'things that were not so long ago loved and cherished' and plants it in the ground (Tan 2008, p.82). After watering the box with herbal tea, and 'whispering a secret (or two)', a real cat emerges (Tan 2008, p.83) - a conglomeration of waste and disused material goods are magically transformed into something living.

The background images and brown colour palate create a sense that the suburb is dull and uninspiring. It is not uncommon for images of suburbia to be painted in similarly despairing shades of brown and yellow. These colours are so frequently used in film, art and literature that depict Australian suburbs, that they have become synonymous with the Australian anti-suburban aesthetic, for example, John Brack's iconic *Wedding* series and Charles Blackman's *The Shadow*. In Blackman's 1953 painting, *The Shadow*, a young girl is pictured deep in thought, her face downcast and covered by a hat. The streetscape in *The Shadow* is alienating and unsympathetic, juxtaposing 'human existence in all its frailty against a hostile and dehumanising environment' (Sowden 1994, p.85). In the background are imposing geometrical houses, painted in flat colour, creating a sense that the suburb is a place 'of repression and stagnation' (Esson 1973, p.73).

The images in 'Make Your Own Pet' are visually similar to the painting of Brack and Blackman. In the first image in 'Make Your Own Pet', a young girl stands in front of geometrical houses; she holds her finger to mouth, confused and in thought. A similar brown colour palate has been

adopted, and sharp lines and arrows guide the eye down the page, following the steps to create a pet. While initially 'Make Your Own Pet' visually identifies with anti-suburban sentiment, the implication is ultimately undermined and ironic. The story not only demonstrates the potential for disused goods or waste to be transformed into something useful, but the magical realist qualities of the pet's creation – of which the young girl's belief and faith in the steps are central. This suggests that creativity is possible, even in a suburb that is aesthetically dull. By recycling these typically useless objects into a functioning, living cat, suburban waste ceases to be useless and is thus reclaimed as something meaningful in the life of suburbia.

Taking material objects and redeploying them as something meaningful is explored further in the story of Eric. When Eric, a foreign exchange student, arrives to stay with a suburban family carrying a peanut as a suitcase, he is welcomed to their home and offered their newly repainted and decorated guestroom. In spite of the new furniture and homely touches, Eric prefers to sleep in a small teacup in the pantry. This is not cause for concern to the narrator who explains that his hosts 'generally made sure everything would be comfortable for him. So I can't say why Eric chose to sleep and study most of the time in our kitchen pantry' (Tan 2008, p.9). Eric is presented an ideal house-guest: polite considerate, and even leaves his hosts with a parting gift. Little is written about Eric, except that Eric is not his real name at all, and that his real name is 'very difficult to pronounce' (Tan 2008, p.8). This is in spite of the visually obvious fact that Eric is some kind of tiny leaf man. The narrator does not directly comment upon the images, and is seemingly unaware that Eric is visually unique, which acts to suggest that the suburbs are a place where difference and diversity are accepted, but also creates a layered meaning, whereby the visual and written narrative reveal different, but crucial information (Nodelman 1988, p.viii).

Eric's fascination with spaces and objects of the mundane and his form as leaf, positions him as 'other' in a way that cannot be adequately accounted for by the protagonist's explanation that he is 'a foreign exchange student' and therefore, his behaviour 'must be a cultural thing'. Eric is 'foreign' because he experiences awe and pleasure at everyday objects and activities. In a series of images, Eric is pictured examining a bottle cap, reading a chocolate wrapper, and clapping his hands over the discovery of a button on a tiled floor. Visually, Eric is the same size as the objects he examines, which acts to focalise both Eric and object within the small, pencilled tableaux, framed by a border of white page. Furthermore, he is voiceless, so the reader is positioned to visually interpret Eric through his relationship to the household items with which he interacts.

In 'The Spatial Imperative of Subjectivity' Elspeth Probyn points out that the relationship between self and space is interactive (Probyn 2003, p.296). Interaction in this story involves Eric as the subject, space, and the implied reader who is called upon to read the objects anew. When Eric searches for the 'meaning' of suburbia he searches under stamps to see what sticks it to the envelope, he questions the numbers on power cords, and the shaping of letters, he visits the zoo, travels in a car, and watches film with wonder – all activities that are seemingly insignificant. His form as other, however, also works to affect the space and objects with which he interacts. Eric approaches and occupies the space differently because he foreign. He looks at the objects he finds,

and the activities he overtakes anew, and in doing so, invites the implied reader to do the same. By juxtaposing seemingly unrelated and functional objects such as a button, chocolate wrapper, and stamp with a fantastical leaf man, the objects too, become foreign and in this way the implied reader is then invited to re-approach the objects, along with Eric, anew.

Eric's use of display ironically undermines the mundane portrayal of ornamentation in anti-suburban culture. As Alison Blunt argues cultural geographers have an interest in objects and 'their use, display and meanings within the home' (Blunt, 2005 p.505). In the case of Eric, how he displays ornaments expresses individualism and subjectivity. The most convincing example of this is the final image of the Eric story, which spreads across two full pages. It is of a gift left behind in the pantry to say thank you to his hosts. Eric has placed the material objects he collected: bottle tops, sharpeners, lolly wrappers, and other refuse, and turned them into organic matter that glows like fire in the dark. The gift is accompanied by a hand-written note: 'Thank you for wonderful time' (Tan 2008, pp.18-19). By displaying these objects Eric turns 'ornaments' into symbols of his own culture and uses them to express his identity and emotion of gratitude.

The short story 'Alert But Alarmed' also relies on the interaction between word and image to challenge the stereotype that ornamentation is necessarily prosaic. 'Alert But Not Alarmed', which takes its title from a government campaign warning Australians to be alert, but not alarmed about the possibility of a terrorist attack because of Australian participation in the Iraq war, every household has been given 'its own intercontinental ballistic missile' in order to '*protect our way of life in an increasingly dangerous climate*' (italics in original), and to take pressure off arms storage facilities (Tan 2008, p.76). Each household is responsible for checking the oil level on the missile, and painting it with government supplied gunmetal grey paint. Over time the householders begin to personalise the missiles 'decorating them with [their] own designs, like butterflies or stencilled flowers' because, 'they take up so much space in the backyard, they might as well look nice' (Tan 2008, p.77). More 'practical uses' for the missiles are found when they 'take off the lower panel and take the wires and stuff out'. Eventually, the missiles are transformed into storage units for 'garden tools, clothes pegs, and firewood'. They are converted into dog kennels, space rocket cubby houses and pizza ovens. The desire to make the missiles aesthetically pleasing is on one hand ornamentation; on the other hand, they intentionally disarm the missiles knowing 'that there's a good chance the missiles won't work properly when the government people come to get them' (Tan 2008, p.77). Ornamentation hereby becomes a subversive act because it enables the residents to express individualism and autonomy. What may begin as 'decoration' leads to the disarming of the missiles because, as the narrator explains:

deep down, most of us feel that it's probably better this way. After all, if there are families in far away countries with their own backyard missiles pointed back at us, we would hope that they too have found a much better use for them.

(Tan 2008, p.77)

Turning the page from the written text reveals a brightly coloured double-page image of the suburbs, complete with re-decorated missiles. The roofs of the houses are painted in bright reds and are set against a vibrant blue sky. The missiles are multiple colours of pink, blue, green, and yellow, and have attracted colourful native birds, which rest atop them. The image accompanying ‘Alert But Not Alarmed’ stands in contrast to previous popular images of the suburb in order to it as a place of individuality, in which individuals are sceptical of government opinion and express autonomy through the medium of ornamentation.

The idea of expressing autonomy and individuality through display, that is implicit in ‘Alert But Not Alarmed’ and ‘Eric’ is critically examined further in the story ‘Distant Rain’. In this story, repressed desires and emotions are put ‘on display’ and are made public in what may be read as a critique of the traditions that have led to the suppression of suburban culture, particularly the written word. This story is explicitly concerned with the ‘vast invisible river of waste that flows out of suburbia’ (Tan 2008, p.29), which is the unspoken, or unpublished emotions of suburban dwellers. ‘Distant Rain’ imagines what happens to the unpublished and unshared poetry that people write, only to hide it away ‘behind a loose brick or drainpipe, or sealed into the back of an old alarm clock, or put between the pages of an obscure book that is unlikely to ever be opened’, embarrassed by their own emotion (ibid). The story accounts for the creation of the ‘vast river’ of wasted emotions by suggesting that:

the prospect of such a heartfelt emotion being seen as clumsy, shallow, silly, saccharine, sentimental, unoriginal, trite, boring, overwrought, obscure, pointless, or simply embarrassing is enough to give any aspiration poet good reason to hide their work from public view. forever [sic].

(Tan 2008, p.28)

The aspiration and alliteration of the fricative ‘s’ sound of the initial five adjectives, followed by the repetition of the plosive ‘o’ sound in ‘boring’, ‘overwrought’, ‘obscure’, and ‘pointless’, contributes to a sense of monotony, particularly through the laborious repetition of the plosive sound. These sounds express a self-conscious anxiety that the stories from the suburbs are mundane.

Visually, the text appears as though it is handwritten on torn scraps of paper, in multiple colours and fonts. Each scrap of paper often contains only one adjective or word, which creates a sense of multi-voiced-ness, that the words are not those of a single narrator, but reflect the anxieties of many that live in the suburbs. Further, there is no clear line to the placement of the images, suggesting that the pieces of paper have been scattered, much like waste; visually, the story may appear to be concerned with physical waste, but a closer reading suggests that it is actually more concerned with wasted emotions.

The story highlights the potential for suburban stories to inspire, when a scrap of writing escapes from where it has been hidden and meets with other pieces of poetry. Together, ‘through a strange force of attraction unknown to science’ all the lost poetry forms into a ball which is a ‘vast accumulation of papery bits that ultimately takes to the air, levitating by the sheer force of so much

unspoken emotion' (Tan 2008, p.31). The image of the paper ball, hovering over a suburban streetscape at night, is roughly sketched in pencil and charcoal. The houses in the images are drawn with sparse detail, suggesting that they are incomplete and 'lacking'. The dark mass of paper hangs ominously in the sky until, over the page, the paper ball is destroyed by a storm and is scattered across suburbia. Each person in the suburb wakes to find the papers 'pressed into accidental verse' on their front lawn, carrying a significant, unique, and perfect message for each individual (Tan 2008, p.35). The colours of the images change from greyscale to tones of pink, apricot, green and blue – the colours of the morning sky – signalling the release (literally) of emotion and causing the people to experience a 'strange feeling of weightlessness', which resolves the ominous tension of the full page greyscale streetscape.

In one way, 'Distant Rain' highlights the way in which suburbia has been marginalised as a place lacking in 'true culture', knowing only mundane ornamentation. This is captured in the initial anxiety expressed about making 'private' emotions public, or putting them on display. However, it is only when private emotions are made public and displayed across the suburb, that the anxiety is resolved. The story ultimately suggests that even those that live in suburbia have stories to be told. In 'Distant Rain', what could have easily regarded as useless suburban waste is in fact it evidence of diverse, albeit often hidden, cultural life in the suburbs. In other words, what initially appears to be mundane, also carries significance and is crucial in gaining an understanding of suburbia.

Tales From Outer Suburbia requires the implied reader to actively engage with suburbia in ways that have been traditionally limited by anti-suburbanism. The implied reader is invited to engage with suburbia anew through an interaction with words and images that depend upon one another for signification. For example, in 'Eric' it is his foreign form as leaf, and his subsequent interactions with mundane objects, that positions the reader to approach the same items as foreign or, anew. Suburbia ceases to be mundane when Eric displays the objects he has found in the pantry. Similarly, the mundane is undermined by public displays in 'Alert But Not Alarmed' and 'Distant Rain'. In children's fiction generally, the suburb and the home in particular, is a central concern because it is a place for socialisation. It is for this reason, perhaps also ironically, that children's fiction is able to present suburbia and the mundane anew. In spite of the persistence of anti-suburbanism in Australian literary and film history, children's literature is actively reconfiguring and imagining new spaces in which children may be socialised and taught. Given the social significance of the suburbs in history, particularly in regards to raising children, it seems important that further attention be paid firstly to suburbia's socialising functions inscribed in children's fiction, and secondly, into the more recent reclamation of suburbia as a site of culture.

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