Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

THE POETICS OF THE AMERICAN SUBURBS

Jo Gill

"Seeing the sheets of sleet untouched on the wide streets,
I think of the many comfortable homes stretching for miles,
Two and three storeys, solid, with polished floors,
With white curtains in the upstairs bedrooms,
And small perfume flagons of black glass on the window sills,
And warm bathrooms with guest towels, and electric lights –
What a magnificent place for a child to grow up!"

(from "Sleet Storm on the Merritt Parkway" by Robert Bly)

Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics promotes and pursues topics in the burgeoning field of twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetics. Critical and scholarly work on poetry and poetics of interest to the series includes social location in its relationships to subjectivity, to the construction of authorship, to oeuvres, and to careers; poetic reception and dissemination (groups, movements, formations, institutions); the intersection of poetry and theory; questions about language, poetic authority, and the goals of writing; claims in poetics, impacts of social life, and the dynamics of the poetic career as these are staged and debated by poets and inside poems. Topics that are bibliographic, pedagogic, that concern the social field of poetry, and reflect on the history of poetry studies are valued as well. This series focuses both on individual poets and texts and on larger movements, poetic institutions, and questions about poetic authority, social identifications, and aesthetics.

Language and the Renewal of Society in Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and Charles Olson
The American Cratylus
Carla Billitteri

Modernism and Poetic Inspiration
The Shadow Mouth
Jed Rasula

The Social Life of Poetry
Appalachia, Race, and Radical Modernism
Chris Green

Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry
Berrigan, Antin, Silliman, and Hejinian
David W. Huntsperger

Modernist Writings and Religio-scientific Discourse
H. D., Loy, and Toomer
Lara Vetter

Male Subjectivity and Poetic Form in "New American" Poetry
Andrew Mossin

The Poetry of Susan Howe
History, Theology, Authority
Will Montgomery

Ronald Johnson's Modernist Collage Poetry
Ross Hair

Pastoral, Pragmatism, and Twentieth-Century American Poetry
Ann Marie Mikkelsen

(Re:)Working the Ground
Essays on the Late Writings of Robert Duncan
edited by James Maynard

Women's Poetry and Popular Culture
Marsha Bryant

Poetry After the Invention of América
Don't Light the Flower
Andrés Ajens, translated by Michelle Gil-Montero, introduction by Erin Moure and Forrest Gander

New York School Collaborations
The Color of Vowels
edited by Mark Silverberg

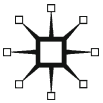
The Poetics of the American Suburbs
Jo Gill

The Afro-Modernist Epic and Literary History
Tolson, Hughes, Baraka
Kathy Lou Schultz

The Poetics of the American Suburbs

Jo Gill

palgrave
macmillan



THE POETICS OF THE AMERICAN SUBURBS

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2013 978-1-137-34022-1

First published in 2013 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®
in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-46478-4 ISBN 978-1-137-34023-8 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137340238

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gill, Jo, 1965–
The poetics of the American suburbs / Jo Gill.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. American poetry—20th century—History and criticism.
2. Suburban life in literature. 3. Suburbs in literature. I. Title.

PS310.S875G56 2013
811'.509358209733—dc23 2013024240

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: October 2013

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Also by Jo Gill

Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics. 2007.
Women's Poetry. 2007.
The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath. 2008.

Permissions

Excerpts from the following are reproduced by kind permission:

From "Sleet Storm on the Merritt Parkway" by Robert Bly. Reprinted by permission of the author.

From "Evening in the Sanitarium" from *Collected Poems: 1923–1953* by Louise Bogan. Copyright © 1954 by Louise Bogan. Copyright renewed 1982 by Maidie Alexander Scannell. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

"Beverley Hills, Chicago" from *Annie Allen* by Gwendolyn Brooks © 1971. Reproduced with permission of Brooks Permissions via Copyright Clearance Center.

From "Heat 'N' Eat" by Burge Buzzelle from the *Wall Street Journal* (1956). Reproduced by permission of Dow Jones & Company, Inc.; permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

From "Suburban Evening" by Langston Hughes, the author wishes to thank the Crisis Publishing Co., Inc., the publisher of the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, for the use of the material first published in the April 1967 issue of *The Crisis*.

Carolyn Kizer, excerpts from "The Suburbans" from *Cool, Calm & Collected: Poems 1960–2000*. Copyright © 2001 by Carolyn Kizer. Reprinted with the permission of Copper Canyon Press, www.coppercanyonpress.org.

From "A Poet of the Suburbs" by James Lewis, first published in *College English* (1973) by the National Council of Teachers of English.

From "A Place in the Country" by Elizabeth Ellen Long. Originally published in the November 1950 *Ladies' Home Journal*® magazine.

From "Song of the Suburbs" by Rachel Mack. Originally published in the July 1955 *Ladies' Home Journal*® magazine.

From "Increment" by Josephine Miles from *Poems 1930–1960* by Josephine Miles, courtesy of Indiana University Press. All rights reserved.

From "Approach," "$7500," and "New Tract" by Josephine Miles from *Collected Poems, 1930–1983*. Copyright 1983 by Josephine Miles. Used with permission of the poet and the University of Illinois Press.

From "Panther" by Josephine Miles, first published in *The Kenyon Review* Vol. 18, no. 1 (1956).

From "Sprinkler in the Suburbs" by Julian Mitchell, first published in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 69, no. 2 (1961).

From "The Beautiful Lawn Sprinkler" and "Blue Suburban" by Howard Nemerov from Howard Nemerov, *Collected Poems* (1977). Used with permission of the University of Chicago Press.

From "The Town Dump" and "Suburban Prophecy" by Howard Nemerov from Howard Nemerov, *Mirrors and Windows: Poems* (1958). Used with permission of the University of Chicago Press.

From an unsigned poem, "The One Room Apartment," originally published in the March 1955 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal*® magazine.

From Louise Goyol Owen's poem "Gold Grows on Trees," originally published in the September 1961 issue of *McCall's*® magazine.

From "For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further," "Funnel," "Ringing the Bells," "Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn," and "What's That" by Anne Sexton from *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems*. Reprinted by permission of Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc. Copyright © 1981 by Anne Sexton.

From Louis Simpson, "In the Suburbs" and "Sacred Objects" from *The Owner of the House: New Collected Poems 1940–2001*. Copyright © 2001 by Louis Simpson. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of BOA Editions, Ltd., www.boaeditions.org and with the permission of the Random House Group Limited on behalf of Secker & Warburg.

From "A Cardinal" by W.D. Snodgrass from *Selected Poems: 1957–1987* (1987) by Delmore Schwartz. Reprinted by permission of Kathleen Snodgrass for the Estate of W. D. Snodgrass.

From William Stafford, "Elegy," from *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*. Copyright 1954, © 1998 by William Stafford and the Estate of William Stafford. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc. on behalf of Graywolf Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, www.graywolfpress.org.

From William Stafford's poem, "Suburban," originally published in the July 1950 issue of *The Ladies Home Journal*® magazine.

From Reed Whittemore, "Hester Prynne," first published in *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 7, no. 3 (1945).

From "Marginalia," "To An American Poet Just Dead," and "Water Walker" by Richard Wilbur from Richard Wilbur, *New and Collected Poems* (1989). Reproduced with the permission of the author.

From James Wright, "A Girl in a Window" from *Above the River: The Complete Poems* © Annie Wright. Reprinted by permission of Wesleyan University Press.

Unpublished material from the Phyllis McGinley Papers at the Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library is reproduced with the permission of the Special Collections Research Center and Patsy Hayden Blake.

An early version of part of chapter 3 is forthcoming in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* while a previous version of some of the material from chapter 4 has been published in *Western American Literature*. I thank the editors of both journals for their interest in this work.

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

Numerous individuals and institutions have stimulated and sustained the research for this book. Colleagues at the University of Exeter including Tim Kendall, Helen Taylor, Helen Hanson, Phil Wickham, Jane Poyner, Paul Williams, Andrew McRae, Steve Neale, Karen Edwards, Jane Spencer, Michael Wykes, Nela Kapelan, Mark Whalan, Lee Rumbarger, Sinéad Moynihan, Joe Kember, Emily Bernhard Jackson, and Vike Plock are owed a particular debt of gratitude. Julia Davey, Gwen Rumbold, and Anna Dickinson have all helped ease the load at crucial times. I also acknowledge with thanks the University's award of a period of study leave during the early stages of this research. Audiences at the Universities of Leicester, Lancaster, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Kingston, Sussex, Oxford, and at Vassar College and Hofstra University have responded generously to presentations of work-in-progress for which, many thanks. Fellow members of the British Association for American Studies have provided a congenial support group and an inspiring body of scholarship; Martin Halliwell, Catherine Morley, Theresa Saxon, Ian Bell, Nick Selby, Sylvia Ellis, Sue Currell, and George Lewis, amongst others, deserve my thanks. Participants in the Cultures of the Suburbs Network, including Martin Dines, Chris Niedt, Mary Corcoran, Geoff Woolcock, Paul Burton, Choodamani Nandagopal, Tim Vermeulen, and Jill Sullivan have helped to shape my thinking about the suburbs. Thanks, too, to Kevin Young and Amanda Golden for several leads. Former colleagues at the University of Gloucestershire including Simon Barker, Simon Dentith, Shelley Saguaro and the late and much missed Peter Widdowson supported my early work on Anne Sexton and thereby helped to open a route to the suburbs. Stan Smith has been a much valued ally. Lynne Crowley, Patti Roberts and other representatives of the Larchmont Historical Society graciously extended their hospitality on two occasions; my chapter on McGinley benefits from their assistance. I thank Patsy Hayden Blake and Peter Blake, McGinley's daughter and grandson,

for their interest in the project. Staff in the archives at Syracuse University, at the British Library and at British Library Newspapers provided help and invaluable resources. I thank the British Academy for a research grant in support of the initial archival research on McGinley, the British Library Eccles Centre for a Fellowship that allowed me to immerse myself in newspaper and other materials that would otherwise have remained out of my reach, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding that allowed me time away from teaching and administrative duties in order that I might finish the book. I am grateful to Robert Bly for permitting me to quote lines from one of his poems on the cover of this book, and to Brigitte Shull, the editorial team at Palgrave, and their anonymous reviewers for taking the book on and seeing it through. Finally, some personal thank yous: to Frances Hollingdale who has tolerated a shift from "Anne" to "Phyllis" with her usual aplomb; to Sheena and Ray Hennessey; George and Margaret Gill; Andy, Lissie and their families, and to Jeannette (Nana) Gill whose endless support, encouragement and faith are appreciated. The biggest debt, and the greatest thanks and love, as always, to Neil, Jacob, Freya, and Keziah.

Introduction

In a 1989 essay on "The Elusive Soul of the Suburbs" commentator Philip Nicholson asks, "Who sings the song of suburbia? Where is its poet?" In his conclusion he answers his own question firmly and in the negative: "There is no official school or philosophy of suburban culture; just as there is no poet, artist, or sculptor to present its voice, its face or the dimensions of its imagination" (206, 208). The aim of *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* is to establish the presence and to argue the significance of numerous poets of the postwar American suburbs—poets whose work amply, if in previously overlooked ways, demonstrates the "dimensions of its imagination."

Mid-century suburbia has, from the outset, been the object of detailed and sustained commentary on the part of psychologists, sociologists, physicians, planners, historians, journalists, and public intellectuals—a chorus that has been amplified by novelists, filmmakers, and the writers of television sitcoms. This body of work has been extensively critiqued of late by scholars of the suburbs such as Robert Beuka and Catherine Jurca, yet the work of poets of the suburbs and the contribution that their writing made to popular and critical perceptions of suburban space and everyday life, indeed to the construction of what one might call the suburban imaginary, has been entirely hidden from view. *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* seeks to bring this poetry to light and to explicate its significance both in terms of its formal properties, and of its relation to the larger cultural, historical, geographical, and ideological contexts in which it emerged and has been read.

In these respects, the aims and methodology of the present study have much in common with the work of Cary Nelson, Joseph Harrington, John Timberman Newcomb, and a number of other scholars in the broad field of poetic and cultural studies. As the title of Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945* indicates, his aim—one that I share—is to recover or restore to critical attention poetries that have been occluded. His interest, like mine,

is in exploring the processes by which certain kinds of poetry have been privileged in literary history, while others have quietly disappeared. For Nelson, as for others working in this area (including Heidi Bean, Mike Chasar, Maria Damon, and a number of contributors to Damon and Ira Livingston's 2009 collection, *Poetry and Cultural Studies: A Reader*), poetry cannot be understood outside or apart from its social and cultural contexts (for Newcomb, its "discursive networks" (*Would Poetry* xvi) and for Damon and Livingston, its "social matrix" (11)). Nelson finds, and my own project illustrates, that such a process of recovery requires a "general reconsideration of the relations between poetry and the rest of social life" (*Repression* 19); and it involves a rethinking and a further restoration of poetry's sometimes hidden audiences. My work in this regard is informed by, for example, Harrington and Joan Shelley Rubin's fascinating studies of poetry's varied publics and uses. The present study seeks to recover the sensibilities—the right to read and to find meaning in poetry—of a suburban audience more typically dismissed by scholars as, for example, in Alan Filreis's rather scornful (hence "folks") critique of populist poets and their readers:

> There were of course the Edgar Guests of modern verse—market-minded folks who sought an audience among members of a new suburban middle class decorating their mod split-levels with biomorphic furniture and knew the phrase "April is the cruellest month" from ad campaigns for household wares. (300)

What we see here is a kind of shorthand whereby "suburban" is taken to signify a mundane mediocrity that barely merits serious consideration. One of the main aims of *The Poetics of the American Suburbs*, in recuperating this domain (postwar suburbia, its poets, and its readers), is to trace the effects of this persistent disparagement on the emergence of a characteristically self-conscious, even self-doubting, suburban poetic voice.

Inevitably, such a recovery process requires us to ask questions of the canon and about the construction of certain literary historical narratives, and to think again about the ways in which cultural value is ascribed and disseminated and, conversely, denied and erased. For Cary Nelson, the deployment of "schematic two-part contest models [is] a recurrent feature of the way we write literary history" (*Repression* 2). Poetry emerging from the postwar American suburbs—as an historical, cultural, and spatial formation predicated on bridging the perceived chasm between city and country, work and home, public and private—is arguably a uniquely valuable site for the testing and indeed overthrowing of such problematic models. In

generic terms, and as the rest of this book will make clear, the poetry of the American suburbs sits in a complex relationship to the perceived binaries of canonical ("heavy") and popular ("light") verse, often traversing these boundaries, speaking to a range of audiences, and thereby throwing up some interesting challenges to our perceptions of the field.

The poetry discussed below might be said to have fallen foul of that tautological process outlined by Bean and Chasar, and by Damon whereby poetries that have not, for all sorts of reasons, met the perceived standard for recognition as "poetry" have thereby gone unnoticed in terms of their contribution to the ongoing definition of the genre. In other words, if we do not consider popular verse about suburbia (such as the work of Phyllis McGinley or the various poets discussed in chapters 1 and 2) to be what we call "poetry" then we can continue to regard "poetry" as a genre that has nothing at all to say about suburbia. The present study seeks to correct this oversight, to ask how such writing "shape[d] emerging notions of what 'poetry' meant" in this period (Bean and Chasar 5), and thereby to make the poetry of the postwar American suburbs *matter*. My project, like Damon and Livingston's, is willing at times to defer aesthetic value judgments (while, like Harrington, implicitly raising questions about their historical origin) in order to ask not, first and foremost, is the poem good? But in what ways is it good for and in a particular culture? (Damon and Livingston 2; Harrington, "Poetry" 267).[1] As Harrington argues, "in order to understand contemporary poetry as it exists, one must do so in terms of the meanings, uses, and effects of poetry in the lives and communities of readers and writers" ("Poetry" 277). The broad question, one implicitly posed throughout this book, is "what do people in certain social moments find beautiful or engaging and why?" (Damon and Livingston 6).

In answering these and related questions, I bring together close readings of the poetry, detailed analysis of other contemporary discourses, and an attentiveness to the materiality of postwar suburban culture. Thus my methodology has much in common with Damon's (*Postliterary* 4) or Rachel DuPlessis's reading strategies; I deploy a critical practice that "mediate[s] between what is said *in* poetry and what is said *as* poetry" (DuPlessis, "Hoo, Hoo, Hoo" 310). My approach exemplifies the indivisibility of poetic and cultural studies; the latter, as Bean and Chasar have recently argued, has "become part and parcel of the warp and woof of poetry criticism—even a necessary method of close reading" (8). My readings emerge from the "intersection" (ibid.) of these fields—a site of often productive "tension," as Tricia Rose indicates (195). This tension is part aesthetic and part cultural and, in the case of modern suburban poetry, offers compelling insights into the ideological pressures of the day.

One of the most important acts of recovery that *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* can undertake is the recuperation of the profoundly political and historical dimensions of this work. If this is an unexpected finding, given the alleged apathy and introspection of postwar suburbia, it is also a measure of the subtlety and craft of the poetry itself, which demonstrates a seductive skill in covering its own ideological tracks. For Jed Rasula, postwar poetry is characterized by what he calls the "suburban epiphany" where "suburban" implies stasis, narrowness, and the refusal to look beyond rather limited boundaries, or to engage with political and historical realities (429). Marilyn Chin similarly complains that: "Poetry has moved to the suburbs. Current literary journals contain a lot of poems about the mythology of the self…American poets have veered away from Whitman's idea of the democratic self…Their poems are self-centered, shortsighted; they don't extend to larger concerns" (qtd. in Sontag and Graham 6). As the rest of this book will demonstrate, I take issue with both assertions. I hope to demonstrate, as John Timberman Newcomb argues of the popular verse of an earlier period, that the poetry of the American suburbs "is as susceptible to historical imbrication as any other sort of text" (*Would* xix) and that, to quote Michael Thurston, it is "clearly doing cultural work beyond just looking pretty" ("Tranquillized" 489).

In thinking about poetry's consensual or conflicting relationship to wider contemporary discourses, my study owes a debt to Deborah Nelson (*Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*) and to Edward Brunner (*Cold War Poetry*). Both have recuperated the poetry of the period and shown it to be much more than mere psychobiography (D. Nelson) or "inconsequential" space-filler between the excitements of modernism and the radicalism of the Beats (Brunner ix). For Nelson and Brunner, as in my own work, poetry is to be understood as a richly discursive genre—or more properly, a practice—that is implicated in constructing (as well as reflecting on and dissenting from) its own cultural moment. Just as Nelson reads beneath the surface glare of postwar confessionalism, and Brunner reads between the lines of 1950s formalism, I aim to attend to the detail of the poetry of the postwar suburbs, and, as importantly, to assess the work in terms of its deep and persistent engagement with its own historical and cultural circumstances. As Brunner and Nelson's books, and as I hope my own make clear, this is more than simply reading poetry in terms of its historical background; it is an attempt to arrive at an understanding of the ways in which poetry has shaped the background itself.

Although my study clearly benefits from the insights of the scholars cited above, it also diverges from and develops these critiques in several respects, most notably in terms of its consideration of spatial and geographical—in

addition to historical—dimensions. Where Harrington urges us to "think historically" ("Poetry" 267), or where Cary Nelson insists that "history should permeate the aesthetics of the poem" (*Our Last* 13), I argue that geography (topography, spatiality) also "permeate[s]" this poetry, and must be taken into account in our reading of its aesthetic form and social function. In light of recent theoretical work in cultural geography by Michel De Certeau, Edward Soja and other scholars outlined below, we must understand that social and subjective domains while historically and discursively constituted are also inflected spatially. Thus when DuPlessis, for example, argues for an historic dimension to our reading of aesthetics, I would propose, too, a spatial critique. To her account (here drawing on Robert DuPlessis) of a reading strategy that might "examine objects, discourses, and practices in order to analyze the meanings, ideologies and social-political functions associated with these *in their time and across time*" [my emphasis], I would add that we might also read in terms of location in space and transition between spaces ("Social Texts" 53). Thus, an interest among scholars of poetic and cultural studies in "analyzing the interfaces of cultural materials with their ideological layers and historical allusions as these saturate texts and are specified within them" (56) is supplemented in my own study by a concern with topographical and spatial allusions. This is by way of saying that *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* while attentive to poetry's formal and aesthetic properties, and to its social and historical resonances, also brings to bear an understanding of its spatial significations.

A cultural poetics provides, in Barrett Watten's terms, a "suggestive possibility rather than a mechanism of literary or cultural construction" (167–8). Its contribution is "to suggest the range of voices, styles and discourses at work in the period, to point toward rather than wholly represent their writing practices, to provide possible entrances into their work, [and] to raise interest in rather than settle the status of these poets" (C. Nelson, *Repression* 19). In like manner, my own study of the poetics of the postwar American suburbs (to my knowledge, the first) aims not to stake out or lay definitive claim to the terrain, but to open it up for future and ongoing enquiry.

Poets and Contexts

The poetry chosen for this study spans the late 1930s through to the early 1970s, although the primary emphasis is on the period that marks the heyday of the postwar suburbs, that is, 1945 through to the mid-1960s. The start and end points are determined by the specific historical events that affected poets, editors, commentators, and readers (most obviously, the end of one war and the start of another), by a number of related economic, political,

and social factors, and by the ebb and flow of the poetry itself. Like "the problem of the suburbs" (Haar n. page), a distinctively suburban poetics came to the foreground and then receded from view within this timeframe.

As the first part of this book explains, suburbia was initially the subject of intense excitement, then of detailed scrutiny, and thereafter of anxiety and disappointment. By the middle of the 1960s, the febrile debates that had dominated popular and expert commentary during the peak years of suburban growth had begun to subside. The nation had reached a reconciliation with the seemingly inevitable forces of suburbanization, and had recognized that suburbia while not necessarily the ideal it had once seemed, was nevertheless, not the dystopia alleged by some. Moreover, other concerns (civil rights, feminism, the Space Race, and Vietnam) had come to prominence. The shift in focus is evident both thematically (poets stop talking about suburban concerns) and formally (they start talking in new ways about the new things that now preoccupy them). Cary Nelson suggests that the turn towards open forms at the end of this period represents a rethinking of the relationship between poetry and history as a consequence of the American experience of Vietnam (*Our Last* xi). A similar move may be detected in suburban poetics. From around 1968, poets, publishers, and readers appear to have moved on, and suburban poetry slips out of sight to re-emerge only sporadically in the decades that follow, typically in tandem with concerns about gas prices and the long-term sustainability of the suburban way of life. In the present day, stimulated by popular interest in the environment and in the possibilities of urban regeneration, a new poetry of the American suburbs has emerged as evidenced in the writing of Peter Balakian, Billy Collins, John Hollander, and several others. I regret that it is beyond the scope of this book to examine current (post- or neo-) suburban poetics.

The Poetics of the American Suburbs thus examines the poetry that was temporally, geographically, and discursively implicated in suburban growth during the immediate postwar years. It is a poetry that entered contemporary debates, played its part in promoting and critiquing the suburban dream, and was instrumental in constructing a perception of suburbia as, at times, a stultifying, at times a suggestive, and at times a deceptive space. The interests of this book lie both in the ways in which poetry functions to construct and mediate our understanding of this *topos* and in the particular aesthetic forms and structural devices that it deploys in so doing. Informed by the work of critics in poetic and cultural studies cited earlier, I seek an "interpretative practice at an equal distance from both text and context, as it weaves together strands of both" (Watten 167–8) and I look for common ground across and between poetic and other contemporary discourses as they negotiate the complexities of the era. This study does not attempt to

delineate a particular school or movement in suburban poetry; rather, as indicated earlier, it aims to recover some from among the range of hitherto hidden "modern poetries" that occupy what Cary Nelson has described as a "fluid field of both fulfilled and unfulfilled possibilities, a continuing site of unresolved struggle and rich discursive stimulus" (*Recovery* 7, 36).

The work examined in this book sits both within and outside the received "generations" of postwar American poetry and, as chapter 2 will explain, speaks to readers who "occupy positions along the spectrum between the modernist and the traditional" (Rubin, *Songs* 103). Chronologically, it coincides with the writing of the New York School, the Black Mountain Poets, the Confessionals, the San Francisco Renaissance, and the Beats, amongst others. It has some formal and thematic features in common with each of these even as it resists falling neatly into line with any of them. And although the poetry of the postwar suburbs shares some structural and historical characteristics with what Edward Brunner has defined as a distinctive Cold War poetics, the two should not be taken as synonymous. There is common ground in respect of all of these: but also considerable divergence. This is, then, a poetry that resists and thus prompts us to critique the polarizing tendencies of poetic historiography (as Mark Doty observes: "Any division into firmly defined 'schools' is finally a historian's artifice; the movements of the fifties overlapped and cross-fertilized one another to the point that any boundaries tend to blur and finally disappear" (133)). It straddles the gap between the traditional and the experimental, between early 1950s formalism and the avant-garde, language-based, postconfessional, and postmodern poetries coming to prominence towards the end of the decade. Simultaneously, as evidenced in the work of several writers discussed below, it sustains a light verse tradition that makes a virtue of bridging the divide between poet and audience and cheerfully takes the everyday as its subject matter. Thus the most notable feature of the poetics of the suburbs is—surprisingly perhaps given widespread and persistent perceptions of suburbia's homogeneity—its diversity and its propensity to draw on and also to exceed contemporary modes.

The breadth and heterogeneity of this poetry is evidence of the pervasiveness of suburban development and of the widespread social consternation that greeted its growth. Many of the poems discussed later explicitly engage with the conditions of suburban life (Howard Nemerov's "Blue Suburban," for example). Others deploy the various material and abstract signifiers of suburbia—from televisions, picture windows, lawn sprinklers, and Bendix washing machines to conformity, homogeneity, marginalization, and conspicuous consumption—as a way of marking the territory without explicitly naming it (see Donald Justice's "Men at Forty"). Others, conversely,

use the adjective "suburban" in passing, and invariably negatively in order to invoke a whole set of assumed attributes, for example in Updike's "Apologies to Harvard" of 1973 where the word "suburb" ("the possible / Is but a suburb, Harvard, of your city") invokes both the perceived limitations of suburban life and the continuing cultural reliance of the margins on the centre (*Tossing* 29). The point confirms historian Lewis Mumford's assertion that "for aesthetic and intellectual stimulus, the suburb remains dependent upon the big city" (562).

In terms of geographical spread, the poets under discussion are drawn from across the United States. However, the very visible emergence of the postwar suburbs in and around New York and California (where enhanced publishing, teaching and networking opportunities were also available) has meant that poetry from these regions has tended to dominate the field. The poetry I have chosen is written by women and by men; both genders shared the experience of suburban growth at this time, and both had something to contribute to the debates even if, as we will see, their perspectives were rather different. Similarly white anglo, ethnic, and African American writers have reflected on the place of the suburbs in their own personal and community histories.

Poets chosen for this study include well-known writers of the period: Anne Sexton, Richard Wilbur, Louise Bogan, Donald Hall, John Ashbery, Hollis Summers, Langston Hughes, Kenneth Rexroth, Louis Simpson, James Wright, Philip Levine, Denise Levertov, Howard Nemerov, Howard Moss, Randall Jarrell, William Stafford, John Updike, and Sylvia Plath, to name but a few. Some of these are unexpected. John Ashbery, for example, is more often associated with an urban locale while John Updike is more usually known as a novelist. Each of them, in a variety of ways, engages with the conditions of postwar suburban life as they see it. I also discuss the work of several largely forgotten poets including Josephine Miles (long-term resident of California and at one time associated with the Berkeley Renaissance) and, most importantly, Phyllis McGinley. McGinley, as chapter 3 will explain, was popularly known as the "housewife poet" and as the "Poet Laureate" of the suburbs. Her writing spans the period under scrutiny and provides a valuable starting point and, subsequently, an important point of reference. It offers an apparently robust defense of everyday suburban life, particularly as experienced by women, and makes intriguing use of traditional poetic form. More than this, though, McGinley's work is remarkable because of the way in which it subtly undermines its own narrative of suburban domestic contentment, thereby inviting a resistant or dissenting reading. It also offers an unexpected model of poetic self-reflexivity—one to which the book's Conclusion returns.

In addition, I assess poems by one-off or amateur poets whose writing is found in a range of popular media, often alongside articles, correspondence, advertisements, and cartoons that further helped to construct an image of suburban normality and thus provide an important material context and resource for this study. As chapter 1 will explain, poetry in the mass media was instrumental in constructing suburbia in actuality and in the popular imagination, in selling its potential, and in evaluating its fulfillment—or otherwise—of its original promise. This "occasional" poetry confirms the pervasiveness of suburban themes and the presence of a considerable audience. My discussion here of poetry in unexpected places that spoke to a wide readership (comprising "incidental" as well as "intentional" readers (Chasar, "Material" 302)) benefits from the recent scholarship in poetry and cultural studies outlined earlier and will, I hope, enhance our understanding of the shape and role that modern poetry has taken outside the purview of established definitions and debates. My account also suggests some important crossovers in this period, and in a suburban context, between elite and mass, high and popular cultures. As chapter 2 will argue, there is a striking commonality of interests, form, and voice across and between professional and amateur poets, and indeed across and between popular and elite periodicals. For every *Saturday Evening Post* poem about suburban growth, there is another in the *Hudson Review* or *Poetry* magazine. Individual poets such as William Stafford, John Updike, and Phyllis McGinley published across both domains, indicating the permeability of these boundaries and the importance of what Chasar has identified as "brow-crossing reading practices" ("Business" 34). Relevant resources were also found in journals such as *The Sewanee Review*, *College English*, and *The Massachusetts Review*, in the general press including in *The New Yorker* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and in political or campaigning journals such as *The Crisis* (the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP). Clearly, the postwar poetry of the suburbs spoke across barriers of class, education, ethnicity, gender, and taste. The wide audience for these poetries was a measure of the significance of the suburbs in the popular consciousness, and an indication that the suburbs mattered even to readers (and, indeed, writers) who did not, themselves, live there. My interest here mirrors Michael Davidson's fascination in *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century* with the ways in which historical, social, and geographical change helped to produce reading subjects (18).

In selecting poems for discussion, I have also drawn on postwar anthologies, on various *Complete* and *Collected Poems* and numerous individual collections. The latter have proved a particularly valuable resource. Their titles alone offer an indication of the significance of the suburbs to contemporary

writers, evidencing a shared vision of the suburbs as somehow inauthentic (hence Miles's 1955 book *Prefabrications* or her later *To All Appearances* (1974)), as characterized by glossy or deceptive surface appearances (McGinley's *Stones from a Glass House* of 1946, and Nemerov's *Mirrors and Windows* from 1958), as spaces characterized by transience or mobility, for example, Miles's 1939 *Lines at Intersection*, McGinley's *A Short Walk From the Station* of 1951, and Simpson's *At the End of the Open Road* of 1963, and finally, as uncertain or liminal spaces as in Stafford's *Traveling Through the Dark* of 1962 and Levine's privately printed 1963 collection *On the Edge*.

The suburbs during this period leave their traces in the writing of many poets who were not—or did not define themselves as—suburbanites. In effect the suburbs so pervaded contemporary discourse that everyone had an experience of and an opinion about suburbia, whether they lived there or not. For those who did make the suburbs their home, such as McGinley, the authority of that experience was significant; it seemed to give her poetry credibility in its resistance to urban nay-sayers even though, as chapter 3 will show, certainties about voice and agency are crucially and strategically cast into doubt throughout her oeuvre. Tom Martinson's well-meant contention that "a lot of what we see written about ourselves, out here in the suburbs, is one condescending put down after another" and that if only suburbanites dared to speak for themselves, they would be able to refute the insinuations of "urbanists" (xxiii) is belied by the sometimes disingenuous evidence of the suburban poets discussed below. Other poets were guarded about their origins—a stance that is surely to be expected given the widespread contempt with which suburban culture was treated at this time. Poet Peter Viereck, writing in John Ciardi's influential 1950 anthology, *Mid-Century American Poets*, characterizes his own "anti-urban classicism" by implicitly contrasting it with the scorned suburban "other" which he at first barely dares name and then dismisses by contemptuous and metaphorical comparison with the preoccupations of the "more insidious type of Babbitt" (17). Well after the suburban dust had settled, poet Mark Doty was confidently referring to "the sleep of the suburbs" and willing to deploy Robert Lowell's well-known characterization of the "tranquillized fifties" to indict a "tranquillized" suburbia (134, 143). Such caricatures, as this book will explain, belie the considerable tensions building up in the period and place, and latent in its poetry.

Literary and Suburban Studies

Given the wealth of material outlined above, and addressed in detail below, it is surprising that *The Poetics of the American Suburbs* is the first full-length

study of this field. The larger discipline of Suburban Studies, morphing into a "New Suburban History," has grown enormously of late. Fine recent work by Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, Dolores Hayden, Tom Martinson, and Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, building on pioneering studies by Kenneth Jackson, Robert Fishman, and Sam Bass Warner, amongst others, has informed the argument to follow. The fiction and film of the suburbs has registered in passing in some of these interdisciplinary studies, and has been the specific focus of excellent recent work by Catherine Jurca (*White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel*) and Robert Beuka (*SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film*) both of which go some way to addressing the occlusion of the literature of the suburbs from the scholarly record. In each case, though, the emphasis is exclusively on novels and short stories and, in Jurca's book, on the writing of the interwar period. The poetry of the American suburbs has, as yet, received almost no scholarly scrutiny. The evident privileging of suburban prose over poetry may be taken as a symptom of a broader trend across American literary history. As Harrington explains, narrative form has typically been taken as the source of "cultural critique" while poetry has been (dis)regarded as "the repository of 'aesthetic value'" ("Poetry" 274). In Newcomb's terms, the tendency has been to "define a historicized American literature as fiction, or at least prose, making poetry into something less than an afterthought" (*Would* xviii; see also Davidson, *Ghostlier* xi). A study of suburban poetry, then, has the potential both to recover a range of lost poetries and poets, and to reorientate our understanding of postwar American cultural history

Just as poetry has been overlooked in general studies of the suburbs and of suburban literature, so too the suburbs have been overlooked in accounts of postwar poetry. The only exception of note is to be found in the conclusion to Robert Von Hallberg's 1985 book *American Poetry and Culture: 1945–1980* wherein a brief coda rather apologetically points to evidence of suburban poetry from the mid-1970s onwards (of Robert Pinsky's work, Von Hallberg observes, with some surprise, that it proceeds "without a touch of embarrassment at being suburban" (239)). Jed Rasula's *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940–1990*, published in 1996, cites and critiques Von Hallberg's position, but succeeds only in replacing one set of prejudices with another (in the latter's case, targeting just one poem as an example of the perceived limitations of a suburban poetic). In other studies of mid-century, mid-generation writing, poems of the American city and countryside earn extensive coverage while poetry of and about suburban space remains unnoticed. Current scholarship in poetic and cultural studies, where it mentions place at all (for example in