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Re-Presenting/Representing Melbourne: A literary and cultural analysis of Melbourne's inner city and outer suburbs in contemporary fiction

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of a research project investigating contemporary literary representations of Melbourne's inner and outer suburban spaces. It will argue that the city represented by local writers is an often more complex way of envisioning the city than the one presented in public policy and cultural discourses. In this view, the writer's vision of a city does not necessarily override or provide a "truer" account but it is in the fictional city where the complexity of the everyday life of a city is most accurately portrayed. The article will also provide an overview of the theoretical framework for reading the fictional texts in this way, examining how Soja's concept of Thirdspace (2006) provides a place to engage "critically with theoretical issues, while simultaneously being that space where the debate occurs" (Mole 2008: 3).

Introduction

This is a report on a research project which stems from the idea that there are “many Melbournes” (Tourism Victoria 2010) housed within the inner city and outer suburban areas and represented in “official” and fictional discourses. The project begins by analysing non fictional examples of Melbourne that project a particular construction of the city – the planned, official city of public policy and cultural promotion. The principal concern of the research is however with the ‘unofficial’ or as de Certeau argues the “hidden” city that emerges in contemporary fictional representation. This fictionalised city is much more complex and diverse, much more revealing of the practices of everyday life than the homogenised concept often put forward in public discourses. The question that is central to this research is: *How do contemporary fictional/imaginary literary representations of Melbourne’s inner and outer suburban spaces portray everyday life?*

The novels under investigation are: Christos Tsiolkas’s *The Slap* (2009), Sonya Hartnett’s *Butterfly*, Steven Carroll’s trilogy *The Glenroy Series* (2001-2007) and Michelle De Kretser’s novel *The Lost Dog* (2007). These texts will be analysed in the project along with a number of short stories that have recently been released such as Aboriginal writer Tony Birch’s collection *Father’s Day* (2009) Wayne Macaulay’s short stories *Other Stories* (2010) and *Stamping Ground Stories of The Northern Suburbs* by various authors (2011). Their texts provide a literary perspective on the everyday lives and intricate social networks operating across Melbourne’s inner city and outer suburbs.

The content of these novels is diverse across age, gender, ethnicity, location and lifestyle and will assist me in answering questions such as: What are the moments within the texts which allow for elasticity in traditional stereotypes and roles assigned to people in the suburbs? What are the places within suburbs such as houses, galleries, streets and backyards or even smaller places where urban interactions take place and how do they shape people’s lives? Are there instances of fluidity of gender expectations? How does an Indigenous way of seeing the city dialogue with dominant visions of the city? These questions will be explored through an analysis of cultural and official images of Melbourne and principally through an analysis of the fictional texts with their focus on

fictional characters as they negotiate the everyday terrain of suburban and urban living in Melbourne.

The central argument is that there is a disjuncture between the literary scene in Melbourne and its mainstream image and also that the literary representations are more complex than might first appear. The city represented by the local writers provides another way of envisioning the complexity of Melbourne which is more than the city tagged and labelled in public policy and cultural discourses of the city. These discourses, such as the UNESCO literary city bid and advertising by Tourism Victoria, conjure a particular brand of Melbourne associated with culture, high arts, and the blending of sport and these arts. However, while the tags portray one particular image of Melbourne, it is in the fictional city where the complexity of the everyday life in the city is most holistically portrayed.

The present article will outline theoretical posits to be used in treating the fictional texts, principally drawing on Edward Soja's Thirdspace concept. Whereas the texts are introduced in good detail here, the article ends on an anticipatory note, having prepared the way for the examination and analysis that will follow in the research project.

UNESCO and the 2nd city of literature

In 2008 Melbourne was appointed as the 2nd City of Literature to the UNESCO Creative Cities Network. This success in both economic and cultural terms was reflected in local editorials and author comments on Melbourne's inclusion into the literary city network: "Melbourne will change from a hive to hub for literature" (Sullivan 2008) was one prediction. Perhaps the biggest win for the reading public was when funding for the proposed Wheeler Centre was announced. It was to be a centre for "Books, Writing, Ideas" and the state government immediately "committed just under \$20 million", with \$3 million for the Wheeler Centre building and \$7.2 million for three years of "programs and operating costs" (2008). The since completed Wheeler Centre which sits alongside the State Library of Victoria nominates itself as being "at the heart of an ambitious Victorian Government initiative which saw Melbourne designated as a UNESCO City of Literature", <http://wheelercentre.com/about-us/wheeler-centre> (24 May 2011).

This public and cultural representation of Melbourne as a “literary city” tends to suggest a cultural exclusivity, which has had significant currency for many years enjoying a link with its prosperous past as Australia’s capital city at the defining time of Federation. This representation tends to erase the fact that much of Melbourne is largely suburban, indeed has a history of suburban expansion and that much of Melbourne’s population lives in the suburbs and is culturally diverse. Prevalent in the literary texts under consideration in the project are practices of writing about the city which emphasise the significance of local places and most specifically suburban spaces in the everyday lives of the fictional characters. These texts reveal the existence of “other” spaces of Melbourne. They are spaces where the imagined and the lived co-habit.

The mapping of Melbourne is in its most basic form reduced to a flat UBD reference; a series of coloured lines, grids and numbers. When we “lift” this reference off the map and read the lived experiences, imaginings, history and environment of the people, a palimpsest emerges. Tourism Victoria recognises this multitude of identities and places in its literature about the inner city:

The best of Melbourne is hidden in the details. Explore the city's hive of laneways bustling with activity and creativity, both day and night. Wander down alleys covered in stencil work, lightboxes, graffiti and sculptures to find hidden bars, hole-in-the-wall cafes and boutiques. Visit galleries and specialty stores, and sample tasty delights everywhere from upscale eateries down to quick-bite lunch bars (www.visitvictoria.com).

Alan Davies believes there are many Melbourne "regions" (Davies 2010) to consider across Melbourne's inner city and outer suburbs when he says: “It thus makes sense to think of a city like Melbourne as a number of regions rather than as a very big, singular entity. In terms of what people physically do within the urban area, there are multiple ‘Melbourne’s’” (2010). This includes the values people embrace and the lifestyles enacted. Region is a term which can be applied to a particular food producing area, a wine growing area such as the Yarra Valley region of Victoria. In terms of city regions, Davies suggests a mosaic regional pattern when he writes:

“Each little ‘Melbourne’ or region is centred on a home LGA ([local government area].... For the great bulk of residents, metropolitan Melbourne is more of a construct – an idea – than something that has a real presence in their day-to-lives. With the exception of the city centre, few people venture much beyond their own region” (2011).

Davies’ ideas concur with Tourism Victoria and reflect how the mapped borders of Melbourne’s suburbs offer more of the palimpsest if we view them as reimagined regions; messy and composed of traces of the past as well as the present:

Extending around the bay are a number of inner suburbs, each with its own distinct character and personality. A short tram ride from the city centre, Melbourne’s suburban neighbourhoods are a must see for anyone wanting to experience what life here is really all about (www.visitvictoria.com).

In this respect contemporary fictional representations of Melbourne provide considerable evidence of the “regional” and the practices of everyday life within these spaces.

Definition of terms

Because the research will be dealing with the spatial entities that are both planned and imaginary, it is useful to provide some definitions. The definition of suburb in its most basic form is: “The usually residential region around a major city; the environs” <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/suburb>, (24 May 2011). However cultural geographers provide a more complex picture. Louise Johnson for example acknowledges the slipperiness of the term “Australian suburb” (as have Alan Davies and Tourism Victoria above) but suggests without a fixed identity, at some point - measuring change is difficult. According to Johnson, the Australian suburb has a postcode (as do cities) and was designed around several basic principles revealing: “low –density, freestanding houses accommodating families with children in a sub-urban location, built on a spatialised and class-based sexual division of labour and localised identity” (2006, 201). Even though Johnson’s research suggests the Australian suburb has undergone a “revolution” due to

profound sociological, political, financial and geographical changes (Johnson: 2006) over the past twenty years, there are five international principles identified by Harris and Larkin (1999 quoted in Johnson: 2011) which still apply to suburbs:

- 1 Peripheral location in relation to a dominant centre;
- 2 Partially or wholly residential character;
- 3 Low densities, often associated with decentralised patterns of settlement and relatively high levels of owner-occupation;
- 4 A distinctive culture or way of life; and
- 5 Separate community identities, often embodied in local governments.

Both Alan Davies (2010) and Louise Johnson (2006) have acknowledged variations in definitions of the terms “inner city”, “inner suburbs” and “outer suburb” when discussing Melbourne. Johnson suggests:

The designation of “inner”, “middle”, “outer” and now “fringe” is a moveable feast, shifting as the city expands and as senses of space, time, amenity and desirability alter (2006: 261).

For example, Johnson highlights how nineteenth century inner city suburbs were within walking distance of the city centre, but, by the early twentieth-century “tramways and railways” connected “middle suburbs” “and, with the mass ownership of private cars from the 1950s” (2006: 261) people moved to what we know as outer suburbia.

Both Davies and Johnson also acknowledge the subjective use of the term. Is it defined by land use, location or values? (Johnson, 2006: 260). Or do we rely on other factors such as “population density”, “historical development”, “transport infrastructure ...?” (Davies 2010). The City of Melbourne’s website suggests there are some 15 suburbs within the city boundary (2011). Adding to the mix of defining the inner and outer suburbs of Melbourne, the City of Melbourne website also discusses precincts which lie in five districts on their website (2011). The central business district contains inner city suburbs such as Kensington, Carlton and North Melbourne. Tourism Victoria describes

the inner city suburb as being “a short tram ride from the city centre” on their website (2011).

This project will refer to inner city suburbs as generally those suburbs existing within a 5 km radius – this is approximately three inner city Melbourne municipalities and an area of 79km² (this boundary is taken from a blog titled “What is the inner city?” Davies: 2010).

With these characteristics of suburban and urban space in mind as well as the complexity that attends definitions, it is clear that a tag such as “literary city” or cultural capital” with its suggestions of an inner urban space of aesthetic privilege can and will apply to a portion of the population in terms of identity; but it does not account for Melbourne’s diverse population, the complexity of the city’s urban and suburban spaces, and the ways people are organising themselves and living within those spaces.

The texts

The contemporary Melbourne texts that the thesis analyses constitute a significant contribution to the many and varied representations of the urban/suburban terrain of the city. In Steven Carroll’s trilogy known as the Glenroy novels (2004-2008), the suburb’s inhabitants harbour and/or often conduct secret lives while performing dominant familial and societal expectations in 1960s-70’s Melbourne. It is a “frontier” suburb situated at the juncture between farming community and post war suburbs (S.Carroll 2007: Radio National Book Show). Traversing a literary map of the inner city suburbs and Melbourne’s bush, the story of *The Lost Dog* (2007) by Michele de Krester follows a new way of urban living in inner-city Melbourne as the main protagonist processes the dual cultures informing his identity. The concept of suburban home-life in this novel is considerably removed from the brick veneer houses of Carroll’s Glenroy. An old jam factory, a bedsit and a primitive bush retreat provide the backdrop to a series of non-conventional relationships and domestic living arrangements. In Sonya Hartnett’s novels *Of A Boy* (2002) and *Butterfly* (2009), suburbia houses female elders who, having experienced a dysfunctional family crisis, emotionally, but often unwittingly abuse children within their inner circle. These texts reflect the theme of the lost child in Australian art and fiction identified by Peter Pierce (1999), a theme that is located within the suburban settings of Melbourne. Christos Tsiolkas’ fiction provides “alternative”

perspectives of urban living from a “multicultural” point of view. Stretching across several generations of varying nationalities who live in the inner city and outer city suburbs, his novel, *The Slap* (2008) also depicts a modern Indigenous take on urban living. Texts such as *The Lost Dog*, *Butterfly* and *The Slap* provide a contemporary fictional voice for those inhabitants who live in and around the margins of suburbia.

The short stories of Wayne Macauley which are located in the outer suburbs of Melbourne are no less evocative of strange and wonderful lives than the novels mentioned above. Situated away from De Kretser’s inner city art galleries and the busy coffee shops of *The Slap*, Macauley’s stories feature ordinary suburban people living ordinary suburban lives, but represented in magic realism forms. His characters live in very wide streets where a man hops on a bus that masquerades as a tram, a woman visits her brother who has become a tree and a developer hires weekend “Bohemians” to provide “character and ambience” (Macauley 2010: 5) so he can inflate property prices. *Shadowboxing* (2006) and *Father’s Day* (2010) by Aboriginal writer Tony Birch contain stories situated within the suburbs of St Albans, Brunswick and Fitzroy. The dialogue and social relations within these stories take place in the street, bedsits or housing commission flats as characters, with their fractured lives and relationships seek to make meaning of everyday life in Melbourne’s inner city suburbs.

Thirdspace

This research project will engage with Soja’s concept of Thirdspace: “Thirdspace must be understood as an ‘open-ended set of defining moments’” (Soja 1996, quoted in Moles 2008). Kate Moles explains that “Thirdspace offers a way of engaging critically with theoretical issues, while simultaneously being that space where the debate occurs. It is a place of enunciation, “where new identities can be forged and marginalised voices can speak” (Moles 2008: 3). More succinctly Routledge “imagines the Thirdspace as critical engagement” (cited in Moles 2008: 4). The main theorists to be applied to a Thirdspace reading are Edward Soja, Michel De Certeau and to a lesser extent; Paul Carter and Doreen Massey. By using these different theoretical approaches to a reading of the literary representations of Melbourne’s suburbs, the aim is to “bring out the palimpsestic nature of the region” (Paul Carter: 2011: 4).

Thus it can be argued that the combination of official and fictional representations of Melbourne creates a Thirdspace where different theories are applied to establish new meanings of place. A Thirdspace methodological framework will incorporate urban theory on the changing nature of the Australian suburb. It invites the question: what is being said in fiction and does it reflect Soja's third urban revolution or De Certeau's two concepts of the city? If so what are the implications of this in terms of representations of the city? Theoretical concepts from cultural geography will also be applied to a reading of the texts especially Louise Johnson's work on the changing nature of cities and how this impacts on the ways writers are detailing the lives of contemporary Melbournians.

Just as Soja advocates there are multiple ways of reading and visualising cities and urban areas, there are multiple ways of reading a text. Therefore the theoretical framework will be tailored to suit each book:

Making theoretical and practical sense of lived spaces requires a multiplicity of approaches to knowledge formation, a kind of nomadic practice that builds few permanent structures or inviolable 'schools' of knowing". While accumulating the most useful products of past journey, it must also discard what is less needed in order to move on to new explorations (Soja: 1999; 2).

This thinking offers a very fluid way of addressing space because it shifts and adapts with time, space and each individual situation. This theoretical base will be complemented by the gender-based spatial theories of Doreen Massey and feeds into the idea promoted by Soja of approaching space as a political project rather than applying a "single formalised epistemology" (Soja: 1999).

A reading of a city within the framework of the **Thirdspace** provides a more fluid and dynamically charged account; one full of conflict, change and human dynamics; an account without limits. Thirdspace is described by Soja as a: "fully *lived space*, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual, locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency" (2000:11). He contends that this kind of space (and ways of looking at it): "encompasses both the 'perceived space of material practices, and the 'conceived space' of symbolic representations and epistemology, not as a simple either-or dichotomy but rather as a radically open 'both-and also' expansion" (1999; 2).

This approach to spatiality or “critical thirding-as-othering” (1999: 2) facilitates an opportunity to address a well rounded study of Melbourne(s) as it is and has been represented in public policy, as well as in historical data and fiction that deals with the local. Soja writing in 2010 suggested that “the generative power of cities or urban spatial causality, rarely addressed in the social science literature, is being re-discovered today as a primary source of societal development, technological innovation, and cultural creativity” (Soja: 2010). It is this cultural creativity this project foregrounds in its engagement with the writer’s visions of the city. In particular, Soja’s geohistory offers “a radically different way of looking at history and geography together, treating them as mutually formative and co-equal in their interpretive power” (Soja 1989 quoted in Soja: 2010). The creative writer’s imagination can be seen to be one product of this “*generative power of cities or urban spatial causality*” (2010: 363).

De Certeau and the “Concept City”

Michel De Certeau’s concept city and what he refers to as the two logics of action along with the imagined and planned city complement Soja’s theories to provide a relevant framework for a textual analysis of the chosen texts.

There has been considerable interest in space, place and identity issuing out of cultural geography and writings about the city. De Certeau’s theories on the city provide some key ideas about identity and spatiality. In particular “Walking in the City” (1974 in 2003: 149-165) distinguishes between the imagined city and the planned city. De Certeau argues that the individual’s responses to the city in walking through it, creates a fictional text: “A migrational, or metaphorical, city [that] slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (151). It is a view of the city which escapes the “imaginary totalisations produced by the eye” (151). There is strangeness within the everyday, suggests De Certeau, that does not surface or is not visible to the city planners who create with an overview of the city in mind, a future city rather than a city being lived at the moment. This strangeness forms the basis of stories writers recreate for us. Andrea McNamara writes of this strangeness as a form of football osmosis in an article titled “Speaking a Second Language” (2008). The author informs us of a family history intertwined with the AFL Melbourne’s Collingwood football club:

I was the eldest of four girls; we went to Catholic schools. We were like a whole lot of other families, nice and ordinary. But when we went to the footy at Victoria Park, we entered another world. Usually our group was some variation on Grandad, Grandma, Mum, a sister and my uncle, Johnny, and we parked the Holden at Campo's place – he was a mate of Johnny's who lived a few blocks from the ground....After the game, we'd often have to sit in our car while Grandad and Johnny had a few beers with Campo. This was the other side of Melbourne; it was like seeing the city's underbelly-before the word was a TV series. It was semi-industrial, cramped, inner city, grubby, gritty and it reeked of football (McNamara: 2008).

In this article the author tells something of the dual life she experienced as a child growing up in suburban Melbourne. First she explains how her family was quite ordinary and respectable in a "catholic" kind of way. Then she reveals weekend forays with other members of the family into a male world situated within a semi-industrial landscape. She describes how Melbourne's football culture was an entree into another world entirely removed from her own. It was, she recalls, the city's "underbelly". It conjures another time in Melbourne when Sunday trading in hotels was illegal and women used to mind the children in cars while the men had a few beers after the game. It also reflects the tribal and family culture surrounding football teams; all were still Collingwood supporters even though they had moved on to the "other side". "Nice and ordinary" suburbia was a world away from the "semi-industrial, cramped, inner city, grubby, gritty" reeking of football (McNamara: 2008).

De Certeau's idea of the concept city fits well with the planned city of Melbourne as it is written in documents for future planning - "Sustainable living" is a catch cry for many different interests as is the literary city, heritage city and tourism city:

That is the way in which the concept-city functions; a place of transformations and appropriations, the object of various kinds of interference but also a subject that is constantly enriched by new attributes, it is simultaneously the machinery and the hero of modernity (De Certeau: 152).

At the upper level of the city there is a constant shifting and reassessing of “socio-economic and political strategies” (152); this is the public city, the modern face of economic prosperity/poverty and the branding imposed by local government. Below the public rhetoric we find the “real” or “natural” city which is able to exist without the interference of the language and discourse imposed by city planners. Language may attempt a certain way of organising the city, but, as De Certeau suggests, in reality it merely succeeds in creating a mythical city, one that is destined to be preserved within “political legends” (152).

The city as it exists in public discourse tends to impose a panoptical all-seeing administrator exercising a particular brand of urbanisation. Simultaneously occurring outside of these urban language boundaries De Certeau suggests that “urban life increasingly permits the re-emergence of the element that the urbanistic project excluded” (152). It is this hidden element(s) played out within the suburban and urban spaces represented within literary representations of Melbourne that are of concern here and how these representations engage with and indeed create spaces within the more “official” accounts of the city.

Doreen Massey – social and spatial relations

Within the texts under consideration suburban and urban spaces are portrayed as variously dystopian, gothic, apocalyptic, or specifically gendered spaces. The theories of Doreen Massey provide a way of conceptualising these different genre/spaces within the texts. In her work, Massey articulates why it was important to change historical concepts of place. She claims that a more inclusive concept was warranted, a concept bolder than one which defined place as having a fixed and static identity – an identity often embedded in nostalgia (2004: 126). Massey asks that as this idea of place and space was mostly linked with male nostalgia, where did it accommodate women, children, immigrants, indigenous people and the marginalised? A place is composed of the past, but also the present, the local and the global. Most importantly a place is composed of social relations: “nets of which over time have been constructed, laid down, interacted with one another, decayed and renewed” and “not only is space the product of social

relations [one informing the other] but that “it is those relations which constitute the social phenomena themselves” (121).

Paul Carter and “Ground Truthing”

Paul Carter’s theories on *Ground Truthing* (2010) provide the impetus for a more holistic theoretical model for analysing Melbourne’s inner and outer suburban regions in the texts under consideration. It mirrors Bruce Bennett’s critical regionalism in that it considers both the geographical as well as the “psychological dynamics” of a place (Bennett 1991: 11).

Paul Carter’s work on the Mallee region of Victoria “lifts” such a theoretical framework one step further from the physical, psychological and author imagination. Carter’s creative region concept aims to “bring out the palimpsestic nature of the region” by “looking at the same matter from different points of view” (4). In his case study Carter listens to contemporary and historical accounts of how the land has been travelled, worked and viewed by local inhabitants. He takes into account Aboriginal myths, the individual stories of traditional custodians and the physical mapping of the land as cartographers see it. He becomes absorbed and fascinated by this former inland sea but gives equal weight to modern texts which have been written or painted. As well, there is his own perspective which includes the cosmic space of the sky as part of the geo-psychological and geo-physical mapping. While the Mallee is far from suburban Melbourne, “ground truthing” provides a sophisticated model of reading the “local and the global” (18). For as Carter reasons, if we view the Mallee through the eyes of a geologist for example “we would have to learn the language of the State Department” (Said quoted in Carter: 16). In such an approach he writes: “Nowhere is there provision for standing still or listening; for storytelling or recollecting; for a Keatsian *Gelassenheit* that allows the sand to drift over one’s toes or the water to drift by” (16).

In his earlier work *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), Carter cites as an example the empirical way history has been written since settlement; first by Watkin Tench and later Manning Clark: “As history’s secretary, Clark colludes in history’s own wish to see chaos yield to order” (xiv). Carter also warns that many “formulations of place still think of

creativity as something that can be applied, a product of the observer's interest" (18). This narrow approach to reading a region produces a distorted and biased viewpoint.

Conclusion

This paper does not suggest there needs to be a privileging of one "representation" over another as there are many ways to imagine and live in a city; the planned space of Federation Square in Melbourne, the built environment of Melbourne Docklands, the historical precinct of St Kilda or the topography of the Dandenong Ranges. But it argues that it is in literature and through the "poetic imagining" (Donald 1997: 182) of a city that we are able to experience the heterogeneous "living" spaces of the city and therefore it can be argued, offer a more holistic vision of Melbourne. It has also demonstrated how Soja's concept of Thirdspace can provide a more inclusive and democratic approach to analysing and discussing Melbourne fiction which does not favour one view of the city over the other. Thirdspace reveals a city of many spaces where some players or inhabitants have more power than others at different times; this research is interested in the composition of those spaces within local fiction and what they reveal. As part of an original contribution to knowledge the research draws on the concept of Thirdspace bringing together for the first time the above theorists in a scholarly critical engagement of space and place. It also engages with a specific sample of contemporary Melbourne fiction and the UNESCO Literary city tag in an original critical cultural/literary analysis.

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