Suburban breakout: nomadic reverie in British pop

Dr Andrew Branch, University of East London

'If the city is a machine for living, then some people would think of our suburbs as a machine for dying' (Bracewell 2001, p. 34)

In Bracewell's fictional account of a disaffected suburbanite, invested in popular music as an antidote to the anomie office work effects, the city's energy offers the possibility of temporary transformation. We learn that the narrator's proximity to place shapes his worldview, spatially regularizing the inherited dispositional practices framing the psychic investments he makes.

In order to think through this relationship between popular music and the suburbs, I complete four objectives: (i) establish the hegemonic representation of suburbia since the commercial coming of age of British popular music in the 1960s; (ii) consider the status of this suburban imaginary in response to global demographic shifts and socio-economic trends reshaping twenty-first century Britain; (iii) examine new forms of digital technology impacting where, when and how music is consumed in the context of emergent and connected 'smart cities'; (iv) make the case that 'suburban music', because of its terms of reference, is in thrall to logocentrism and sketch the implications of this for judging its transformative power. I thematically connect these objectives by questioning how suburbia has been legitimated as a source of academic interest, particularly for scholars concerned with the vexed issue of how social relations are shaped by powerful inequities. In positing class as being central to our understanding of the place of suburbia in the social imagination, I endorse Carey's (1992) definition of the suburbs as a signifier deployed by intellectuals to denigrate the people who live there, whom they read as devoid of radical thought, in thrall to conventional pursuits and tastes.[i] Taking this position allows me to identify the key tropes deployed by musicians vis-à-vis suburbia and to examine the extent to which their creative output either reproduces, or conversely resists, this reading.

In insisting on specificity of space and place, my argument will nevertheless resonate with those for whom the psycho-geographic mode of inquiry is paramount, defined in the Debordian (1955) sense of studying the effects of environment on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. While the occupation of specific suburban sites is necessarily an expression of uniquely experienced socio-economic conjunctural determinants, connections will be made by those interested in transnational spatial mappings of identity formation. What concerns us is the proximity of the suburb to a valorized urban *Other*. This is to ask, then, how the suburbs have been made articulated as a key autobiographical reference point by musicians and to interrogate what purpose they serve? Working in dialogue with published research in this area - notably Frith (1997), Huq (2013) and Worley (2017) - I explore how the suburbs have been read as a cultural incubator of reactionary force and, contra, site of resistance. I also interrogate what we mean when we speak of those liminal spaces bordering urban centres, or located along commuter journeys - neither densely populated built environment, nor bucolic utopia. How these spaces are defined tells us much about ourselves and the investments we make in framing who we are and who we are not; what we recognize as legitimated value and what we reject as moribund, reactionary and psychically damaging.

In developing this approach to understanding the centrality of the suburbs to most peoples' lives - they are, after all, where so many of us live - I draw on Bourdieu's (1977, 1990a, 1993) conceptual apparatus underpinning his theorisation of human practice: habitus, capital, field. Utilising these interconnected concepts allows us to bridge the objectivist/subjectivist divide by empathetically understanding human practice as neither the manifestation of unconscious impulses, nor rational computation. Thus Bourdieu's insistence on empirically locating the origins of our worldview in the dispositional practices

we inherit, and through our day-to-day encounters with other field inhabitants renegotiate, has implications for understanding how human perception - in this case the aesthetic perception employed by musicians - is socially constituted (ibid, p3-4). Indeed, we might remind ourselves here that while his analysis of music was limited, what Bourdieu did write cuts to the core of the issue, '…nothing more clearly affirms one's 'class', nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music' (Bourdieu 1984, p.18).

In drawing inspiration from Bourdieu's work, we are able to resist a naïve reading which disconnects how musicians and their audiences have historically chosen to classify the suburbs from their habitual engagement in the field of cultural production and, earlier, the fields of education and family. In short, we need to *denaturalize* aesthetic dispositions. This is important because exposing the classificatory strategies of human actors reveals the power claims they assert in particular fields of practice. Thus the visions of suburbia expressed in the popular music examples we encounter in this account are always an imagined construction, derived from the aesthetic disposition of the imaginer. It is why art-school graduate Karl Hyde, migrant to Essex and co-founder of EDM specialists, Underworld, can proffer a reading of my birthplace Romford at odds with its reputation as a non-place, 'What I like about Romford and south Essex is that it has a can-do spirit. Nothing is impossible. I haven't left Essex since we first arrived here and I probably never will. Romford has got an energy about it. It's my New York' (McConville 2014). What is important to register here is who gets the power to name, to discursively define space and place in terms concordant with their habitual worldview.

'Semi-Detached, Suburban Mr. James' Manfred Mann (Fontana, 1966)

Sitting here as I write, listening again to the tracks that seem to me, and others,[ii] redolent of the suburbs, either through the biographical details of the performer/writer, title, lyrical preoccupation or, more challengingly, affective force,[iii] persistent themes emerge: boredom; a yearning to escape; sneering rejection of the alleged material aspiration of those residing in suburbia, of their perceived homogeneity.

Blur's *There's No Other Way* (Food, 1991), and flipside *Inertia* ('Fear of being left behind' its opening line), is a prime example of British pop's aversion to non-urban spaces. The song's accompanying video, directed by label boss and ex-Teardrop Explodes' keyboardist David Balfe, articulates the feelings of boredom-bordering-on-despair that define the lyrical preoccupations of the band's singer, Damon Albarn: the opening shot providing a homage to the sequence introducing David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (DEG, 1986), in which Lynch's camera shifts from framing the iconic white picket fence of American suburbia to recording the unexpected death-by-stroke of an elderly resident watering his garden. We then follow the camera as it descends into the grass blades and soil of the manicured lawn, accompanied by a shift in musical tone: lightness and order giving way to darkness and the molecular: the suburbs as façade. Albarn's cultural capital, an inheritance from his artist father, undoubtedly ensured that he would have endorsed Balfe's video treatment. Indeed, the remainder of the video is composed of a series of suburban clichés (dutiful but repressed housewife; soberly dressed children; ordered family home, with father overseeing the serving of the Sunday Roast etc.), selected to reinforce the pessimism of *There's No Other Way*: 'all you can do is watch them play'.

I have selected this song because its release year resonates, marking as it does a period of significant social and economic change in the UK: since the early seventies, and exacerbated during the eighties as a consequence of the de-industrialization policies of consecutive Conservative governments, city-based British residents migrated to the suburbs.[iv] That demographic trend reversed in 1991, marking the beginning of a gradual return to the urban, particularly among the newly educated offspring of those whose material aspirations had informed the earlier exodus from city centres.[v] Indeed, as Harris (2011) shows, this return, particularly in London, was instigated primarily by artists attracted by cheap

rents and an environment that indulged their aesthetic outlook - one reliant upon fetishizing the urban poor, a sensibility Harris terms 'urban pastoral'; quoting Stallabrass, a term he defines as the, 'cultural celebration of urban debasement' (cited in Harris 2011, p.227). In this respect Britpop-era Blur, two members of whom studied at Goldsmith College during the same period as a number of subsequently famous YBAs, were merely expressing the 'suburban sensibility' that Simon Frith (1997) detected in the work and pronouncements of many of their contemporaries, notably Suede and Pulp. *There's No Other Way* is the work of a musician in thrall to the allure of the urban as antidote to the sedimented reactionary practices inculcated in the suburbia of their youth.[vi]

Frith, writing at the tail end of Britpop, argues that this suburban sensibility *is* British pop in as much as the configuration of social classes in twentieth century Britain, particularly in the post-war years of pop's adolescence, has ensured that class distinctions have always broadly mapped middle-class youth's fetishization of the urban, derived from the intoxicating myths it constructs about the city - figuratively and literally always just out of reach - as 'gritty' space, inhabited by an authentic (and deeply romanticized) working class. Huq (2013), in her own review of pop's complex relationship to suburbia, reads the period Frith covers - his account essentially takes us from the post-war birth of pop to the tail-end of the twentieth century - as the one in which this sensibility dominated, shaping for so long how many English pop performers invested in their work an antipathy to the environment that often incubated their worldview: from Richards and Jagger jettisoning their grammar-school educated, respectable background in order to reinventing themselves as (cod) urban bluesmen as they sneered at provincial women (Reynolds and Press, 1995); via punk's ambivalent positioning of the suburbs as a culturally-dead space in which either nothing much happens, or what does pass as cultural practice is too in thrall to respectability, aspiration and middle-class convention - saving for a new car, two-week family holidays[2]; to the meditations of late eighties/early nineties pop stars lamenting (again) the sheer monotony of life among the hedgerows and semi-detached homes of the Pet Shop Boys' *Suburbia* (EMI, 1986), an updating of the dream silos of vacuous consumer bliss captured in Roxy Music's *In Every Dream Home a Heartache* (Island, 1973).

This history of the suburbs in pop reads like one long patronizing diatribe by those who position their own mobility and what we might call 'aesthetic awakening' in contrast to the claustrophobic dullness they attribute to the environments they have moved on from. In this landscape, the socially mobile David Bowie is the 'quintessential suburban star' (Frith 1997, p.271). As I have argued elsewhere (Branch, 2012), Bowie's queerness was key to his success, especially among aspiring suburban youth infatuated with his *Otherness* - a self-conscious performance that allowed them to fantasize about their own self-reinvention, and one that Frith suggests can only come from the suburbs: 'As David Bowie…always understood, a suburban pop sensibility means a camp sense of irony, a camp knowingness, a camp mockery, a camp challenge: do they really mean it?' (ibid, p.272).

What to make of this antipathy in respect of suburbia? In Worley's (2017) account of how the suburbs were made sense of by youth between 1976 and 1984, the period he defines as capturing punk's birth and subsequent overt political impact, he argues that to rely on the reading of suburbia prominent in the cultural imagination, captured in my aforementioned account, is to lose sight of 'Britain's shifting demographic' (ibid, p.116) and its impact on how space and place are inhabited and made sense of. I agree with Worley here: to limit our reading of suburban angst to the indulgences of aspirational middle-class youth desperate to acquire an imagined set of pseudo-bohemian dispositions, as it selectively relinquishes the very privilege that has funded its mobility, is to lose sight of how the hinterlands of urban centres - and especially the new towns created in response to post-war slum clearances - have been experienced, for example, by displaced working-class youth. For the latter social group, the (enforced) journey to the suburbs has historically facilitated modest material improvement,

while paradoxically engendering a sense of identity loss, as Cohen (1997) originally contended and recent ethnographic research supports (Branch 2013) [vii].

In thinking about how suburbia has been discursively framed in popular music, then, we need to acknowledge the conflicting narratives alluded to in its representation: it is both a space devoid of difference, lacking 'edge' *and* a space in which working-class youth has had to negotiate a new identity in the absence of the cultural and social anchors its forebears experienced. These dialogic narrations of suburbia, discursively dominant during the post-war period until the 1990s, are exemplified, for Worley (ibid, p.115) in the divergent mobility and thus different lyrical preoccupations of The Cure's Robert Smith and Paul Weller of The Jam: suburbia as established middle-class hell (Smith) and suburbia as edge-land in which, yes, not much happens and the city is still eulogized, albeit through an anxious lens - The Jam's *Down in the Tube Station at Midnight* (Polydor, 1978); *Strange Town* (Polydor, 1978) - but proximity to the non-urban at least allows for an articulation of a negotiated identity; room to breathe. Put another way, for those musicians drawing on the suburbs for inspiration - especially those who spent their formative years living there - growing up in these spaces was read, at least in part, in terms of aspiration, itself shaped by divergent dispositions informed by social class.

'I need a bohemian atmosphere! I'm an artist, Mr. Turner. Like yourself.' Chas in *Performance* (Goodtimes Enterprises, 1968)

In the field of literature - source of inspiration for many suburban musicians accumulating cultural capital in their referencing of canonical texts - Woolf's sardonic put down of the 'middlebrow' archetype - 'of middlebred intelligence…in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself' (1945, p.115) - provides us with critical context. Following Woolf, this is a class fixated on acquiring *prestige* and thus always seeking the approval of 'high culture' highbrows, while simultaneously patronising the 'living-in-the-moment' lowbrows they erroneously position themselves as superior to. For Woolf - as for so many of the members of the dominant class fraction populating the field of cultural production - those seeking recognition, craving the approval of perceived superiors able to confer status, are incapable of truly living; too caught up in worrying about what others will think. Here, in Cammell and Roeg's *Performance*, the bohemian Turner and working-class criminal Chas act as counter-cultural representatives of the high/low brow complementary pairing Woolf valorises.

In the light of Frith's account of suburban pop, we're invited to read its history as middlebrow dispositional practice *par excellence*: the 'suburban' musicians he focuses on, and those captured in Huq's and Worley's accounts, have their artistic expression primarily defined in terms commensurate with their middlebrow status: they are keen on literary references, often self consciously so in the case of the working-class but mobile Weller, an artist who, as Taylor (2017) notes, thought himself 'really thick' on leaving school and whose output, particularly during a period of creativity between '78 and '82, is suffused with references to canonical, *popular* writers. In this regard, Weller's self-consciousness reminds us of Kureishi's quasi-Bourdieusian account of the role linguistic capital plays in distinguishing groups. In his popular-music themed, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi notes, 'For Eleanor's crowd hard words and sophisticated ideas were in the air they breathed from birth, and this language was the currency that bought you the best of what the world could offer. But for us [migrant; working class] it could only ever be a second language, consciously acquired.' (Kureishi 1990, p.178)

Taylor convincingly argues, then that one strand of (suburban) British Pop - mostly white, lower middle-class and male as I read it - is best defined as possessing a 'buried literary sensibility'. Here I would argue that lyrics are foreground because their exchange value is more immediately identifiable. And thus one's desire to creatively express oneself can never be disentangled from one's sense of what is at stake, status-wise. To draw attention to what Woolf would presumptuously insist is the political conservatism of middlebrow culture, however, is to capitulate too readily to a way of reading cultural

practice - and in our case a reading suburban popular music - that sees evidence of paradox as a *de facto* justification for rejection. Conversely, I would call for a more nuanced account of middlebrow taste. Here we must recall Bourdieu's own ambivalence in respect of the ways in which dominated groups either resist incorporation by nihilistically revelling in their domination (lowbrow), or capitulate by adopting, unconvincingly, the values, tastes and dispositional practices of their dominators (middlebrow) (Bourdieu 1990b, p.155).

Genders (2017) has contended, by way of illustration, that in so many respects the period immediately following Punk's mid-seventies intervention was notable for the evident ambition of musicians seeking to embrace a *range* of artistic influences, especially but not exclusively literary ones. For Genders, the period is rife with self-educators, with Bowie and Ferry's Roxy Music as role models for post-punks like Mark E. Smith or Ian Curtis, equally likely to cite Ballard, Burroughs or Camus alongside Berry, Little Richard or Presley. Genders sees scant evidence of this tradition in recent decades - the decline of 'art school' institutions as a radical space for experimentation, noted by Frith and Horne (1987), one obvious explanation - and laments the fact: 'If you believe that popular music is at its best when it channels ideas and fantasies from outside its own confines - even risking accusations of pretentiousness in the process - this has to be considered a loss.' (Genders 2017)

The idea of valuing pretentiousness is also addressed by Reynolds (2009), who makes a case for defining 'middlebrow' not as dilution (insufficiently avant-garde) or capitulation (placing commercial success before artistic) but as a sensibility in which, for certain musicians and their audiences, binaries are resisted, replaced by nomadic fluidity and the exercising of catholic taste. This position doesn't escape the Bourdieusian charge that all that is really happening is a redrawing of taste barriers by newly formed class fractions on the move, but I think if we factor in the self-reflexivity of the musicians Reynolds valorises, we can concur with much of what he argues. By this I mean that if we acknowledge *how* an individual agent self-reflexively reacts to the change that an abrupt disruption between habitus and field gives rise to *matters* - and therefore allow for the possibility of agency - we can begin to formulate an account that Bourdieu himself seemed reluctant to countenance, even though his own fieldwork and indeed his own educational and career trajectory suggested that such an account was plausible. (Bourdieu 2007). Here, then, an example of the 'abrupt disruption between habitus and field' might be the moment that aspiring musicians grasp 'ideas and fantasies' beyond immediate comprehension. That is to say, when musicians, often through fortuitous error, embrace heterodox ideas, thus in part relinquishing orthodoxy, and incorporate them alongside more conventional musical motifs. Indeed, in 2016 Mark Fisher and his colleague Kodwo Eshun cited The Pop Group's *For How Much Longer Do We Tolerate Mass Murder?* (Rough Trade/Y, 1980) as perhaps the finest example of this heterodoxic practice in their public celebration of the records reissue and the band itself, formed by middlebrow-educated Mark Stewart and Nick Shepherd. For Fisher, The Pop Group's embracing of free jazz and realisation of 'febrile dance music', alongside their refusal to subordinate form to proselytising lyrical content, exemplified an ambition and relevance not witnessed since the calls-to-arms of the counter-culture, 'The Pop Group retained fidelity to the counterculture's demands for a total transformation of the world. They were still part of what Herbert Marcuse called "the Great Refusal": "the refusal of that which is"' (Fisher 2016). Reynolds (2009) defends this reading of middlebrow pop - middlebrow because it cannot entirely evade the form's commercial imperatives - by proposing that at its best - think Public Image Limited's *Metal Box* (Virgin, 1979) - it re-heterodoxises the field and therefore,

…calls into question both the mainstream and the margins: pop, for its lack of risk and reach, and the unpop peripheries, for their pointless extremism, concealed macho, impotent inconsequentiality. At its best, middlebrow really does offer the best of both worlds. There's a sense too in which anything really good is going to end up in the middle zone, if not by intent then by acclamation: The Beatles and the Smiths, obviously, but also the Velvet Underground, Sonic Youth and My Bloody Valentine (all of whose achievement lay not in their noise – plenty of other people were dealing in that – but in the merger of melody and riff-structure with swarming textural chaos).

'That golden age from the voice of the suburbs, we're seeing the end of it now' (Anderson, 2018)

In my final section, I want to offer some concluding remarks about the status of 'suburban music' in the contemporary moment. My starting point here will be to think about how the suburbs themselves, specifically in twenty-first century Britain, are in the process of being repopulated and redrawn in the context of global demographic shifts and emergent socio-economic trends. This redrawing is occurring to such an extent that, as Anderson suggests, the established 'voice of the suburbs' populating the scholarly accounts I have referenced has reduced purchase. In developing this line of enquiry, I shall comment on another key development, namely the centrality of new forms of digital technology and their impact on how, when and where we listen to music. This analysis will move us beyond the account of middlebrow taste and its classificatory judgement-making processes of music production and consumption that I have sketched out. In this regard, I want to ask whether suburban pop actually still *exists* and, if so, what are its determinants if its voice has indeed lost purchase? This will allow me to explore one key aspect of Reynolds' thesis above, namely the need to focus equal attention on music itself as a potentially transformative affective political force, rather than just lyrical content.

In their review of the ways in which the suburbs have been theorised across a range of disciplines, the geographers Vaughan *et al* (2009) argue that while the complexity of cities as sites of human interaction with the built environment has been acknowledged repeatedly, too often the suburbs are essentialized as peripheral non-spaces, or are cited in different contexts - dependent on different conceptualizations - as specific case studies, which nevertheless fail to establish their *generic* relevance. Another geographer, Hudson (2006), details at length the ways in which region and place have historically informed the ways in which people identify with music. Hudson's concern here is not to explain how the transformative qualities of music might work, but to show how particular places (e.g. Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield) have embraced the production and visibility of music cultures, often in an attempt to instigate regeneration policies in the context of responding to the prolonged effects of deindustrialization. Hudson is, in my view, rightly sceptical that such initiatives - establishing 'cultural quarters' etc. – are sustainable, although he does acknowledge that music nevertheless plays a vital role in bringing communities together and harnessing a sense of identity vis-à-vis place.

This work is important because, as Vaughan et al (ibid, p.485) note, the spaces we identify as suburban, 'are a theme of universal significance, implicated in the growth of globalised 'world cities' and the rapid development of the built environment in emerging economies.' In 2018 their thesis holds: the growth of cities like London and Manchester in a UK context, and their appeal for economic migrants seeking better material conditions, has been maintained, despite eight years of austerity-driven government policy. This has meant that the suburbs and satellite towns that constitute the conurbations of these global cities continue to undergo complex transformation in response: they are destinations not only for the upwardly mobile, but remain one for a now a more racially diverse working class[viii]. Alexander Thomas' short film, *Beverley* (Easy Tiger Productions/Urban Edge Films, 2015) captures the 1980s iteration of this trend in its narrative focus on the racism and identity crisis experienced by a multi-racial girl when her parents move to suburbia, with the emergence of Two Tone providing the backdrop. They are also the forced destination of the disenfranchised and newly impoverished 'service class' that Richard Florida (2017) belatedly recognizes is the major casualty of the gentrification thesis he once exalted. Paradoxically, suburbia is also the destination of choice for the less well-off members of Florida's (2002) 'creative class', who nevertheless still have enough economic capital to leave the city, often by cashing in on their 'bijou' properties in order to relocate to a house in the suburbs and invest their energies in contributing to the setting up of burgeoning suburban 'cultural quarters', with their attendant art galleries, music venues and festivals.[ix] To inhabit the British suburb today is to witness not the bland uniformity of a complacent middle-class - the dominant British suburban imaginary of the post-war years - but two adjacent worlds divided by property value.

Evidently, digital 'solutions' to the challenges such rapidly evolving forms of urbanization give rise to are grist to the mill for tech companies seeking to maximize profits by owning consumer-generated data - the panoptic city as reality. More specifically, the market dominance of the Smartphone has reshaped how, when and where we listen to music. Michael Bull's (2005) analysis of the ways in which this new technology (in his study the then innovative iPod) facilitated the creation of 'personalised soundworlds' and allowed for the aestheticization of our movement through space has proven to be prophetic: we can now listen to an almost infinite amount of music at the swipe of a thumb; compose or invest in playlists to soundtrack our promiscuous moods; and have music affect us as a by-product of our use of gaming apps, when we watch broadcasts or surf the web.

The implications of these technological innovations for youth cultural practice were spotted early by Bennett (2004), who invited us to consider the ways in which music and place were necessarily being re-conceptualized as a consequence: gone were the subcultures of old, patrolling the suburbs looking to cure their ennui; replaced instead by virtual tribes, whose members connected across increasingly meaningless national borders. Wither the suburbs? And indeed wither the city itself when, for Sinclair (2008) such tech dependency means that digital natives are, 'now wedded to a kind of instant, dominant present tense of the electronic digital world where people no longer move around in the city but above the city. They're floating on their devices.' Sinclair's reading of current (primarily youth) practice is typically speculative and he has been criticized, with some justification, for selective vision in his flanuerial accounts of how Londoners engage with their city. Laura Oldfield Ford (2011, p. 14), for example, has argued that Sinclair's classed habitus explains these blind spots in her own politicised reading of the ways in which urban spaces are either privatised or discarded under neoliberalism. However, Sinclair is surely right to draw our attention to the impact new technologies are having on how we experience space and place in the contemporary moment.

"It's boring down there, oh my God…Hackney is just live - the police cars, you hear them on the hour. In Edmonton, you hear a police car once every five years or something, man. It is dead down there."' (Hasted 2004)

Shystie, UK grime artist and, in 2004, newly identified suburbanite on the cusp of fame, reminds us in her commentary of an important caveat to the omnipotence of the virtual world thesis I have just sketched: the experience of it is uneven when filtered through the categorising categories of class, gender and race: to be *visible* on (sub)urban streets is to be marked. What is interesting about Shystie's take on Hackney, her birthplace, is the value she attributes to the sounds of the street. Indeed, later in the same interview, she contrasts this with the scenario she envisages when it is put to her that a future grime star might be contemporaneously making music in their suburban bedroom: 'She'd be talking about cows and the sheep she sees across the road. Oh, that is dry, man.' Here, the city is marked by manifold possibilities, its value residing in the disparate and infinite noises its built environment and diverse inhabitants produce. Conversely, the suburbs remain a cliché: semi-pastoral, *silent* dead ends.

This emphasis on disruptive sound is, however, an idea that we should pursue. What we need is an understanding of how music taste operates affectively (DeNora 2000), or, specifically, consideration of taste as an activity as Prior (2013) conceptualizes it. In this reframing we can explore music's ability to affectively engineer transformation. How the suburbs feature in this respect - particularly when, as I have noted, they are being repopulated by a new generation of tastemakers - is the key question. Perhaps the answer is to propose that if music is at its most affectively powerful when experienced *collectively*, the contemporary *individualized* listener is always in a sense suburban, with digital technologies facilitating the reconstituting of the clichéd privatized bedroom from which bored youth long to escape. To be suburban here is less about actual physical environment and location, and more about isolation.

If, then, to be suburban is, in Deleuzian (1988) terms, to be sedimented and territorialized, what kind of music de-territorializes, or acts, in incremental ways, to shift schemes of perception, engineering the transformation essential if the world is to be experienced anew? Braidotti (2011) articulates this challenge by drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's use of the terms 'migrant' and 'nomad', the former fixated on borders and boundaries, the latter a non-sedentary subject, aware of its partiality. For Braidotti, new social imaginaries come into play when a nomadic spirit is embraced. But how do they come into play? The experience of drug users is a form of nomadicism, of course - transformative flight an effect of momentary affective disruption of synaptic transmission. But what might be the lasting aural equivalent? I suggest that such equivalence is nomadic music that subverts genre, that which confounds rather than conforms.[x] More than this, it is music that works most *affectively* in a communal setting - where bodies interact - in order to achieve its transformative power. In this sense the conservatism of 'suburban music' might be its logocentric focus on articulating the hegemonic suburban imaginary of dead spaces and historically-contextual orthodox views - too often we hear what we already intuitively know, which offers little beyond affirmation. Here, music is affectively experienced in isolation as it evokes doxic habit.

The irony here is that pop from and about the suburbs has too often been aesthetically predictable in its railing against perceived conformity. Here, the tragedy of Doyle (2015) hearing Eno's music for the first time - 'Another Green World for me is inextricably rooted in times of quiet isolation and contemplative solace in the subtopian landscapes of Chandler's Ford, Hampshire when I was between the ages of 16 and 18' - is that he *contemplated* it, as middlebrows are inclined to do, suggesting a quelling of emotional attachment and subordination of body to mind.[xi] Suburban music's negation, by contrast, is music alive to new possibilities, confounding our expectations and reconfiguring our emotional energies by going against the grain and remaining unencumbered by lyrical prioritization. That the latter might indeed, contra to Shystie, be produced in suburbia, where 'it's boring', is a possibility we should allow for given that it is *how* people use and make music that increasingly matters. To paraphrase a famous musician from the suburbs: it's the concrete in our heads we need to dissolve. This can be increasingly realized in built environments in flux, reshaped by technological innovation and flows of people – now more ethnically diverse than the mono-cultural suburbanites of old – which undermine the increasingly porous borders of nations, cities and towns.

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[i] As Huq (2013, p.1) notes, in many respects the suburbs are a peculiarly Anglo-Saxon phenomenon, bound up as they are with sedimented social class hierarchies.

[ii] I am indebted to those online members of the *Interdiscplinary Netwrok for the Study of Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change* who responded to my social media request for lists of their favourite 'suburban' tracks. Network details available here: https://www.reading.ac.uk/history/research/Subcultures/

[iii] One of the tasks facing popular music' scholars is how to make sense of its power to inform human practice beyond that which can be captured via a semiotic reading. The work of Middleton (1993) provides a lucid account of why the non-verbal affects of sounds themselves are integral to accounts of music and its relations to the wider culture.

[iv] See Thomas, Serwicka and Swinney (2015) for an overview of these trends.

[v] The early nineties also mark a period of sharp growth in student numbers in the UK higher education system (Office for National Statistics 2016).

[vi] Albarn left the London suburb of Leytonstone at the age of nine to live in the edgelands of Colchester, Essex until he returned to London to take up a university place at Goldsmiths College.

[vii] This research involved interviewing head teachers leading schools located in the new towns like those referenced by Cohen (1972) about the challenges their adolescent male pupils faced in establishing their geographical identity. While their grandfathers and fathers were able to invest in east London as a place central to their sense of who they were, these boys struggled, feeling neither 'a Londoner', nor 'Essex and proud'.

[viii] See Muir (2016) for a contemporary account of this trend and its implications.

[ix] While evidenced-based data is as yet unavailable, this is not mere assertion: my own experiences of undertaking a journey back to the suburbs and witnessing first hand these trends is important to register.

[x] While this conceptual apparatus remains useful, it is worth remembering its limitations. As Best and Kellner (1991, p.107) argue, in their measured appraisal of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical legacy, habit and routine aren't *de-facto* unprogressive and in fact shape so much of what we productively do on a day-to-day basis.

[xi] See Gilbert and Pearson for a critique of the ways in which 'meaning' has been foreground in the Western tradition of music appreciation. As they note, 'this tradition tends to demand of music that it – as far as possible – *be meaningful*, that even where it does not have words, it should offer itself up as an object of intellectual contemplation such as is likely to generate much meaningful discourse' (1999, p.42).'