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‘When everything old is new again’: Class, consumerism and masculinity in Alasdair Duncan’s *Metro*.

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Abstract

Alasdair Duncan’s narrative *Metro*, set in Brisbane in the early 21st century focuses on Liam, an unapologetically self-styled white ‘upper middle-class brat’, whose sense of place and identity is firmly mapped by spatial and economic co-ordinates. This article considers the linkages between spatiality and identity in Duncan’s narrative, as well as the ways in which traditional, hegemonic (heterosexual) forms of masculinity are re-invigorated in the enactment of an upper-middle-class script of success, privilege and consumerism. It argues that the safeguarding of these hegemonic forms of masculine identity involve strategies of spatial and bodily expression underpinned by conspicuous consumption relegating other forms of sexual identity to an exploitable periphery.

Keywords: Brisbane, upper-middle-class masculinity, homosexuality, consumerism, spatiality, representation.

Introduction

The past thirty years in western society have witnessed a displacement of the ‘cultural authority’ of white, middle-class males. Many critics have been quick to point to a social anxiety emerging in this demographic as a result of the effects of rapid globalization, mass consumerism, women’s expanding participation in the workforce and the increasing visibility and rise in socio-economic power of formerly marginalised and culturally diverse populations. Edward Soja suggests that these and other ongoing changes in the late twentieth-century have significantly contributed toward the ‘restructuring of the urban imaginary’ and its impact on everyday life. Boundaries have been blurred, and new ways of acting in the ‘urban milieu’ created. However, of particular concern writes Soja is how: ‘this restructured city-centred consciousness extends its sphere of influence to shape the way urban space and society are regulated and controlled, how they are kept together in the face of powerful disintegrative forces’.

Literature as a cultural formation contributes significantly to debates about and inscriptions of place and identity. Sophie Watson contends that places ‘make their mark. So do we’. These ‘marks’ are signifiers of the ways in which people experience and express place and they point to the importance of identity as always located and contingent, as well as to the profound effect of representation and the symbolic on the ways of knowing and experiencing place. Alasdair Duncan’s novel *Metro* (2006), set in Brisbane in the first decade of the twenty-first century, engages with the patterns of social change around male identity and the city in its focus on white ‘upper middle-class brats’. These ‘brats’ are the sons of the established affluent middle class, whose cultural power is shored up and maintained in the performance of their ‘brand’ of heteronormative, homosocial masculinity. In its characterisation of metrosexual protagonist Liam and his cohorts, *Metro* enforces the idea that the maintenance and performance of white, upper-middle-class heterosexual masculinity betray its precarious purchase on a stable base. Moreover, the social expression
of this type of masculinity involves violence towards the self and others, and an aggressive patrolling of spatial and subjective boundaries that might threaten to collapse traditional relations of power and gender.

Shifting masculinities?
Several critics have argued that globalization and the rapid expansion of consumer culture have played a significant part in shifts in white Western constructions of embodied masculinity. While many of these have been progressive moves away from dominant gender/body formations and practices there have also been reactionary moves amongst middle-class males to illuminate the signs and expressions of traditional forms of patriarchal masculinity in order to sustain their cultural capital. The novel Fight Club is a timely reminder of the latter response. It has also been suggested however, that the rise of a ‘commercial grooming culture’ has allowed men to indulge in a form of self-nurture thereby loosening some of the ‘old bonds of masculinity’ that were centred on a fundamental conceptualisation of the hard, expressionless male body. Liberation into more diverse forms of masculine identity premised on this change is not, according to some, readily forthcoming. The ‘feminization’ of the masculine body around consumption practices promising an erasing/easing of gender and class distinctions, has not necessarily brought about a concomitant feminization of the public sphere or increased the ‘legitimacy and centrality of queerness’. On the contrary, the culture of consumerism, with its accent on conspicuous signage and aestheticising of the body and lifestyle maintenance, has produced forms of upper middle-class consumption aimed at sustaining the traditional powerbase of heteronormative masculinity at the expense of other forms of masculine/male identity. Duncan’s representation of these types of aspirational bodies in the Brisbane context demonstrates how ‘a globalised subjectivity or persona is at the same time localized and customized’ made manifest in the practices of everyday life. Thus in Metro, various Brisbane sites play a significant role in marking and reinforcing upper middle-class male heterosexual identities and consumer practices in a process Elizabeth Grosz identifies as the ‘mutually defining’ relationship between spatiality and subjectivity.

‘Upper-middle-class brats’
Metro is set in Brisbane in current times and focuses principally on private school educated University student Liam and his friends Callum, Lachie and Brad; their relationships, their clothes, their rituals, habits and habitats. Liam works at ‘Metro’, which in his own words is a ‘shop that sells up-market surf and skate clothes to fashionable upper-middle-class brats – a demographic that I guess includes me and pretty much all my friends’. Liam and his friends are the sons and daughters of affluent professionals, sharing a culture of money, consumerism and future success assured by the charters of private schools and sandstone universities. They live in the ‘leafy suburbs’ of St Lucia and Indooroopilly, the blue chip suburbs of Ascot and Hamilton. They are destined, as their parents before them, for the professions; they drive European cars as their wealthy parents do, they live in the investment property houses owned by their parents. Duncan’s identification of the Brisbane suburbs and sites of class privilege and success tracks a geo-economic history/development of the city; but it also offers, in its fictional articulation of lived spatiality, a critique of the classing gaze and its alienating and divisive structures of power. This critique is expressed in the representation of Liam’s social world and his interactions with others in the wider socio-spatial field.
In the absence of his girlfriend Sara, who is holidaying overseas, Liam plays up, not with girls, but with other young men. His sexual engagements with them constitute a potentially hazardous transgression of the heteronormative, homosocial script of upper middle-class privilege and success which has traditionally conferred power and position on its members. Liam’s awareness of this informs his anxiety about just how important it is to outwardly assert a heterosexual masculine identity reflecting the symbolic values of his class. Perceiving the strong possibility of a loss of power his attraction to the same sex would generate, Liam acts on his leanings in secret. Publicly he plays the hegemonic man to his peer group, performing as the others do, the identity rituals that concretize it. He distances himself for example from the ‘faggy initiation rituals’ of the college students but engages in emblematic rituals pertinent to his own homosocial group – the often repeated elaborate handshake between members, the ritual salutations expressed in stock phrases. Performing the man within the group also involves explicit denunciations of the feminine and the homosexual. Girls are homogenised as a sexually objectified group and are sites of voyeuristic male pleasure. When Felicia, one of Sara’s oldest friends, complains to Liam about ‘these disgusting guys who drool all over them and basically want them to keep their mouths shut and have sex on command …Liam’s response is that they ‘sound like pretty much every guy I know’.

While Liam publicly denigrates homosexuals to friends, he also has covert sexual relations with them, firstly with Kristian, the younger gay brother of his friend Lachlan and later with Andrew an older man from Liam’s own homosocial and class group. But it is the nature of these engagements that consolidates his upper middle-class position of power over other sub-cultural groupings. He divorces the physical act of intercourse from any kind of cognitive or emotional expression and sees it as just another way he can assert power over a subordinate (‘faggy’) group. In this way his actions become acts of violence and denigration designed to buttress the hegemony of the heterosexual masculine hierarchy. This is captured in Liam’s comment in relation to Kristian that he was not sure whether to ‘fuck him or hurt him badly …Possibly both.’ In asserting his power, Liam also takes the dominant position in the physical relationship, not allowing himself to be penetrated.

Class plays a significant role in the privileging of certain forms of masculinity. Despite his overtly expressed aversion to ‘fags’, Liam has openly gay friends such as Jay, but these friends have earned their class stripes. Jay, for example, has attended the right school and engages in the psychological, social and economic markers of his peer group. Jay is however excluded from the group’s more valued and exclusive heterosexually focused rituals and behaviours that are designed to maintain the group’s superior rung on the masculine hierarchy. Liam cannot countenance intersubjective sexual relations with other males that might involve disruptions to trenchantly conservative identity classifications of class, sexuality and gender and the behaviours and attitudes that attend and naturalise them. When it is suggested that Lachlan, one of his peer group might be gay, Liam reacts with incredulity, a response that strongly intimates the need to maintain the boundary around heteronormative masculinity that anchors his sense of self and defines his class position. This fear is not restricted to Liam. Friend Lachie’s older brother Chris, who works part time in the family law firm, had, in grade eleven, made a comment about sleeping with Liam – if he were that way inclined – then makes Liam promise never to tell anyone what he said. Liam and Chris’s reactions to homosexual relations suggest that while they might be privately entertained in terms of satisfying a sexual desire, they are excluded from a public subjectivity founded on normative expressions of masculinity and male identity. This aligns with Kimmel’s contention that ‘Homophobia is a central organising principle of our cultural definition of manhood’. Mac an Ghaill contends that boys are
constantly vying for masculine identities within institutions and other socializing contexts which ratify the hegemonic gender order. To be ‘one of the boys’ involves manifesting a ‘hyper-heterosexual’ identity. Liam’s character in *Metro* regularly evinces this need to dispel any dissonance with the normative. Feeling threatened by the markers of homosexuality overlapping with those of his particular heterosexual group, Liam creates a very public homophobic masculinity expressed linguistically, spatially and physically.

**Simulacra, spatiality and the city**

In *The precession of Simulacra*, Baudrillard famously declares that in the era of late consumer capitalism, we live in a world of the hyperreal, where we have substituted ‘signs of the real for the real itself’. In erasing any ‘distinction between the real and the imaginary’, the true and the false, the hyperreal offers only the ‘orbital recurrence of models’ simulations effectively adrift from any moorings in the real. Baudrillard suggests that everything, even the urban imaginary, is now ‘condensed around simulations and simulacra’ and his assertions effectively underscore some of the questionable outcomes of the shifts in capitalist society from an ethic of production to an ethic of consumption. In late capitalist consumer society, these shifts have ushered in new ideas around the expression and maintenance of gendered identity. Critics argue that ‘Masculinity (like femininity) is constructed as a product available for consumption if one merely chooses the appropriate brand names’. Class and gender are located in outward displays of consumerism; what the body wears; where the body lives; what the body does; ‘the signs of the real’, ‘orbital recurrences of models’ that speak for the self, indeed are a substitute for the self. Smith, drawing on Baudrillard explains, ‘we are doomed to experience each other only as players in a field of signs and to passively experience spectacles and simulacra that reflect upon each other.’ When Liam in *Metro* observes a ‘group of kids’, who are all wearing ‘identical pairs of Cons and look like carbon copies of every kid you see hanging around the city’, he is invoking the lexicon of simulacra, where the copy no longer relates to a ‘real’ and all individuality is erased.

Stalleybrass and White have identified the ways in which different locations and sites in nineteenth century cities ‘speak’ of relations of power, fear, and desire, organised around class and gender. The borders around these spatial sites are continually being challenged by social and cultural change and exchange, but in many instances there is trepidation and fear generated by this mixing. According to Friedman, ‘Borders promise safety, security, a sense of being ‘at home’; borders also enforce exclusions, the state of being alien, foreign, and homeless’. Spatiality importantly acts as an inhibitor or facilitator of social boundaries. In the subject’s experience of the constructed environment, there exist zones and boundaries, socially exclusive or inclusive, so that ‘crossing the boundaries will be easier for some individuals than others’.

In *Metro*, certain Brisbane suburbs are represented as sites of affluent middle-class privilege and power organized around the preservation of social boundaries – they too speak of power and fear as they speak of a homogeneity and sameness of lives lived within them. Liam’s descriptions of Toowong invoke Baudrillard’s simulacra inflected by class when he observes ‘almost all of the houses are Queenslanders tastefully renovated to the point where they look pretty much identical’ adding that ‘I like this part of town a lot and I can actually see Sara and me living somewhere like this one day’. Other Brisbane suburban and urban spaces are also mapped by class, sexuality and gender.

The Boatshed, a restaurant adjacent to the Regatta, is depicted as a site of upper middle-class heterosexual masculine privilege where the baton of success and power is handed down from fathers to sons in ritualised and repeated rites of passage over lunch and
a good quality wine. Liam, his friends, and their respective fathers attend one of these sessions with Liam observing that:

The theme of the afternoon was, essentially, that we were about to enter into some big rite of passage, the next stage of our manhood or something – I don’t know how much of the sentiment rubbed off, but the following year, for reasons that may or may not have had anything to do with that lunch, the place became one of our regular hangouts too.

The Regatta Hotel is represented in the novel as a site of cross-class heterosexual masculine fraternizing and male competitiveness which actively markets the differences between the sexes in staging the Miss Regatta contest where women are objects of the male gaze; a practice that invokes sexist fantasies shared across class groupings. The urinals are situated so that the user has a view through a one-way mirror over public areas suggesting a very dominant and dominating collective masculine space. But despite this spatial homosocial bonding around conventional and shared forms of heterosexual masculinity, Liam and his cohorts are quick to mark their own class boundaries. Vying for a parking space at O week UQ with ‘two girls in an old Volvo’ and ‘an old couple in a Mercedes’, Lachie eventually triumphs claiming ‘Fuck that shit, man...This is ours. This is our territory, right guys?’

The Valley is portrayed in the narrative as another site of multiple forms of masculinity, homosocial and class groupings. It is a place where, as Baudrillard contends, ‘players experience each other in a field of signs’. Here we find members of the aspirational upper-middle-class represented by Liam and his friends; the middle-class subculture of emos; the skaters, who are often associated with middle to lower incomes, and the unemployed. Liam views the Valley as a place to work (the shop, Metro) and to party, but partying in the Valley is different to partying in St Lucia or Toowong where he and his friends are more inclined to drink beer and socialize at the homes of girlfriends. However despite the potential for democratization across male groupings within the social space of the Valley, (the ideal community respectful of difference that Iris Marion Young writes of) Liam and his cohorts hold firmly to the boundaries that distinguish them from others. The Valley is a space where they take illegal drugs and congregate in their specific homosocial groups marked by class and sexuality.

Paradoxically, while Liam and his friends often lampoon their parents’ lifestyles in the suburbs, they adopt the same disdainful eye and classing gaze, toward anyone from another ‘class’ or social group. At the Fringe Bar, Liam ignores a ‘guy’ who is studying multimedia – ‘I basically took that as a cue not to ask him anything else’ and is not surprisingly bored by a multimedia display that features images of blood-soaked American flags with words such as ‘hegemony’, ‘imperialism’ and ‘Chomsky’ painted on them. These words are signs of otherness and oppression he clearly fails or declines to read. Later, waiting to get into the Family nightclub, Jay and Liam survey the ‘line to get in (which) was un-fucking-believable – a queue of ravers and fags and girls in low-cut things. They are able to short-circuit the queue because of a ‘contact’ on the door. Once inside they talk ‘about how much we hated the Valley’. The gay population, the ‘faggots’ Liam repeatedly refers to, exist outside traditional Australian markers of class and they have been historically marginalized by hegemonic masculinities. Even so, Jay believes he is above ‘the Valley trash’ despite his homosexuality alienating him from mainstream society. Loyalty to this aspirational class is more important to him than being a part of the larger gay Valley scene. At the opulent Brut bar, where Coronas, cocktail dresses and Country Road
suits are the standard signatures of wealth and privilege, Liam is dressed down in a trucker cap and denim, but observes that the group has recognized his class credentials when he comments: ‘I probably look to them like the first step in a progression that will one day lead to exactly where they are; one day I’ll be dressed exactly the same way’. 47 This view reinforces Shankar’s contention that: ‘Whereas in subcultures past, brands were used to represent a larger ideology or practice that held a group together, the commodity has now become the ideology’. 48

In Metro the signs of upper-middle-class male consumption are read off the body in situ and act as overt and covert codes to classify groups and maintain boundaries around them. Thorstein Veblen and Pierre Bourdieu 49 have argued that consumption practices and commodities as well as upbringing and education are used as symbolic markers of class groupings, conferring status on groups and securing shared meanings within and across the habitus. Metro signals this class defining practice of conspicuous consumption in its focus on the ways in which characters draw on commodities to identify the ‘self’. Thus clothes (brands) music (types) social practices within spatial sites are used by Liam and his upper-middle-class ‘brat’ demographic to mark class and cultural sub-groupings determining who is excluded and included, who is ‘foreign’ and who is ‘at home’50.

**Heterosexual masculinity and consumerism**

Heterosexual masculinity is increasingly linked with consumerism through the fetishising, eroticizing and commodifying of the male body. 51 In his study of consumerism and masculinity from the middle of the nineteenth to the first two decades of the twentieth century, Kimmel stated that ‘The body did not contain the man; it was the man’. 52 In the early part of the twenty-first century, consumer practices are blurring the traditional lines between genders. The cosmopolitan middle-class male consumer with money to spend is invited to be as narcissistic and self-nurturing about his body as women have been. The term meterosexuality has been coined to identify the new male consumer who is, the argument goes, ‘not so caught up in homosociality and heteronormativity’53. But for many men, the consuming male body threatens the traditional markers of masculinity bound up with essentialised notions of physical dominance and competitiveness. In Metro, Liam constantly expresses anxiety that his relationship with consumerism might be misread as effeminate. Liam and his friends shop at the same places young gay males do, gay boys often come into his Metro shop, and Jay, who works with Liam, is gay. There is a shared pool of consumer activities made possible by the competitiveness of the market which like shared spatial sites, threatens conventional boundaries around class, sexuality and gender. Miller suggests ‘the wholesale commodification of male subjectivity witnessed in something like Queer Eye for the Straight Guy is actually about re-asserting, re-solidifying very conventional masculinity’. 54 Metro reinforces this idea in Liam’s focus on ‘looking good’. ‘Basically I feel like shit but look fantastic and that’s really all that counts’ 55 he says, but this is quickly accompanied by a reference to his firm abdominals and is a link that ‘re-solidifies’ the power and centrality of ‘very conventional masculinity’, in its emphasis on the hard male body. Anthony Easthope argues that the hard body, associated with conventional ideas about the masculine, ensures ‘there are no leakages across the edges between inner and outer worlds’. 56 Liam’s actions in later beating up Kristen, foreclose on any possibility that the hard body might also be a gay (city) body and express his anxiety about embodied heterosexual masculine identity ‘leaking’ across all kinds of social and sexual membranes.

Metro indicates on the one hand a shift in the way some young upper middle-class men are relating to each other through particular body reflexive and consumer practices, but on the other suggests that new forms of metro masculinity are aimed at preserving the
cultural authority of older forms. Participating in homosexual activity with other straight or gay guys is a form of body reflexive practice associated with Liam’s subculture or private ‘club’, and much like Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* it is part of a secret world. Just as ‘no-one talks about fight club’, no-one in Liam’s group talks about their behaviour with ‘faggots’; but, if we are to believe Liam, ‘Lots of guys do things like this believe me’. However just as the members of fight club recognise the tell-tale markers of those who participate, Liam and other straight young men recognise their kind by a particular look and often a playful attack on each other aimed at questioning their sexuality. Repeated mantras such as ‘faggot’ or ‘suck my dick’ perhaps constitute a testing of the waters, but within the liaison, there is always an asymmetrical power relationship in the bid to be top dog. Liam’s preference is for younger and slightly built boys where his power and safety are assured, and where he can control the situation so that it has no consequences in the wider social world.

Liam’s encounter in Melbourne with Andrew an older and worldlier metrosexual demonstrates all the hallmarks of this particular form of hegemony, where both class and sexuality have a symbiotic relationship with each other. Liam’s belief that, unlike the ‘faggots’ he abuses, he is engaging in his other life on his terms (much like a hobby), is challenged when he meets Andrew, a ‘vile yuppie’, a bigger, more violent and experienced version of Liam. Heading to Melbourne for an interview in banking, and staying at his parents’ apartment, Andrew offers Liam the ultimate metro experience. The apartment is extravagant, they drink Absolut vodka and take designer pills. Even Andrew’s dealer lives in a ‘fairly nice building’, not some inner Valley ‘dump’, as Liam’s dealer does. Andrew’s friends are dressed to impress with ‘expensive haircuts and Tsubi shirts, aviator sunglasses and trucker hats’. The girls are attired in ‘Commes Des Garcons, Issey Miyake, Easton Pearson, and the only thing that really distinguishes them is that some are blond and some are slightly less so’. Andrew manages to get them past the long line at a club. The scene could be any Saturday night for Liam; this is the Brut bar taken up a notch in sophistication, but the similarities between the Brisbane and Melbourne scenes strongly suggest the ‘orbital recurrence of models’, a simulacra of consumption, sexuality and spatiality.

Back at the apartment, Liam discovers in Andrew, a mirror image of himself. The mirroring effect is particularly pertinent here as it indicates, after Lachlan, that Liam’s self-image, his imago, is affirmed by Others in the Symbolic order, a gestalt. In this respect, the mirror image has much in common with the simulacrum in its insistence on the ‘virtual’ nature of reality and on a closed system of linguistic and cultural signs in which identity can be registered. Liam is momentarily unnerved when Andrew assumes a dominant and abusive tone: ‘You’re nasty. You nasty fucken metro fag’. The scene could be from the perspective of the young boy Liam exploited on campus during O Week celebrations. “I don’t” … I say, drunkenly, realizing how fucking whiny, how girly my voice has started to sound’. ‘I’ve never …’ Picking up on Liam’s tone, seems to excite Andrew further ‘you’ve really never let a guy fuck you before?’ … ‘You silly metro fag … you’ve never had a taste of your own medicine?’ Liam finally concedes ‘This is just like being with me’. Liam is finally penetrated, and this, coupled with his fear of infection or worse because of a split condom, impels Liam’s resolve to reaffirm his membership of the dominant heterosexual group on his return to Brisbane.

Violence towards the self and others indexes the ways in which patrolling the borders of class, sexuality and gender can assume anti-social and reactionary forms. Butler claims that such violence expresses a deep desire to sustain the hegemonic gender order. When Kristian threatens to disclose his relationship with Liam to others, Liam violently assaults him. While Liam admits to some nascent feelings for Kristian, it is clearly something he understands is at odds with the homophobia underwriting the culturally authoritative script
of heteronormativity. Punishing Kristian, he is also castigating himself for potentially jeopardizing his secure future: ‘I just want to make Kristian hurt, to punish him, to make the little faggot suffer…This is not just about Kristian … it’s about everything…since Sara left and everything before. It’s not just Kristian I’m doing this to. I’m doing this to myself. To everyone …’65 After the attack, Liam returns to the home of Kristian but this time it is to see Brad and it also appears his motive is to confirm his heterosexuality both to himself and Kristian while re-establishing order into his ‘straight’ acting life. Even as Brad falls into the old routine of ‘you’ll suck my dick’ Liam refuses to engage the surprised Brad. ‘Stop telling me to do stuff like “suck your dick,” I say to Brad’.66 When Sara returns from her overseas trip, Liam, unpunished and unrepentant, embraces her and the opportunity to regain the safe upper-middle-class space of heteronormativity: ‘We hold on to one another more tightly, and I realise, as I feel her body warm against mine: everything is going to be okay’.67

**Looking for the ‘real’**

Liam’s ultimate rejection of any genuine emotional engagement with an ‘other’ (male or female), his final capitulation to external signs of upper-middle-class heterosexual masculinity, and his apparent refuting of anything beyond the simulacrum, demonstrate the fragility of the boundaries of class, gender and sexuality even as they uphold them. Averting any possible damage to a future blessed with money, position and privilege, Liam clings to his class grouping claiming that ‘it’s the comfort that comes from knowing that you look and feel exactly the same as everybody else … Conformity is highly underrated’.68 However, despite the confidence that this proclamation exudes, Liam’s is a conflicted character. He is often astutely aware of the falseness of his existence, cynical about performances of identity (especially heterosexual masculinity) and often contemptuous of the rituals of observance to the core values of his class. He refers obliquely, but with more than a tinge of regret, to the absence of any meaningful intergenerational communication, captured in his description of his conversation with girlfriend Sara’s father, ‘Mr. Chase exists in a perpetual daze and is almost incapable of talking about anything but the M4 and his architect firm’.69 This arguably points to a deeper need for ‘real’ experiences over the simulacra. Liam’s clandestine homosexual experiences have the potential to be dangerous and disruptive to boundary demarcations and they offer something different to the superficiality of mimicking the everyday life of his parents and friends.

Writing on cities, Ian Chambers suggests that the city ‘exists as a series of doubles. It has official and hidden cultures; it is a real place and a site of imagination’.70 In Metro these doublings are reversed. For Liam the ‘official’ site in culture exists as a place in the imagining of his class and is played out in the everyday through a series of signs relating to wealth and privilege. The ‘real’ is a hidden culture of secret homosexual liaisons, and is enacted by Liam across a series of ‘real places’. His sexual acts within these places transcend the ‘binary opposition’ of ‘public’ and ‘private’ and the oppressive gender associations with those places traditionally used to regulate sexuality.71 In these encounters there is the strong suggestion that Liam is much more sexually aroused by men than women despite his attempts to disavow these feelings, and at one stage in his relationship with Kristian he confesses ‘and in those few seconds I feel something strange, something that might also be real affection for the little fag’.72

The differentiation in the levels of excitement that Liam experiences when interacting with men as opposed to women is revealed in an incident at the airport lounge. Scanning fellow travellers, Liam wonders what it would be like to rest his head between the shoulder blades of one male backpacker. The backpacker, catching Liam staring at him smiles, and
Liam smiles back, adding ‘I don’t know what to make of this’. By way of contrast to this spontaneous exchange, Liam’s reaction to a flirting girl immediately after at the check-in desk, is, in his own terms, ‘a conditioned response’.73 One night stands with the opposite sex, drugs and alcohol, are tools of escape for many of Liam’s peers from their carefully pruned suburbs and planned futures. Sex with another male however is one life experience not openly scripted for Liam’s peer group and it is an experience loaded with excitement, the potential for the discovery and thrill of the unknown. This dislocation from the safe upper-middle-class heteronormative space is indicated in a number of instances in the text, again tellingly conveyed in the relationship between spatiality and behaviour. Liam conducts his homosexual relationships with Kristian in his parents’ bedroom and in Kristian’s family home, the sites of affluent middle-class heterosexual family life. In usurping this space for transgressive sexual experiences, Liam may be seeking sexual and emotional (‘real’) experiences that are not managed and mapped for him. Duncan acknowledges this in an interview when he comments ‘I think to an extent, the characters in the book wear their privilege and wealth as protection against scarier, outside forces in the world’.74 Judith Butler observes that ‘sexuality does not follow from gender in the sense that what gender you “are” determines what kind of sexuality you will “have”’.75 The narrative suggests this in Liam’s behaviour, but it also draws attention to the fact that there is no social endorsement for its legitimacy within his class structure; thus he is compelled to refute his feelings and defend the dominant heterosexual position.

Other incidents in the narrative either explicitly or indirectly allude to the price that is paid for the maintenance and performance of white upper-middle-class heterosexual masculinity. Liam’s friend Lachie attempts to consolidate his ‘straight’ masculinity at the Regatta after rumours suggest he might be gay, but the outing has the opposite effect. Unable to communicate his feelings to his mates (‘you don’t understand’) when asked to explain, he appears to realize the futility of his dilemma, resigning himself quickly with a ‘fuck it’ before slipping back into the macho male binge drinking role of his mates.76 Later he falls apart, phones his girlfriend Anne, and breaks off their relationship. Lachie’s attempts at emotional intimacy with his friends ironically assume violent and self-destructive form. Confused and upset, he attempts to fight an unwinnable fight, while his friends, embarrassed and at a loss, brush off his need for affection and compassion (clearly seen an expression of the effeminate). Lachie’s unsettled behaviour in the overtly male space of the Regatta Hotel suggests he can no longer sustain the masquerade of hyper-masculinity premised on the evacuation of more intimate emotion.

He later commits suicides but the cause is not revealed. At his funeral, the possibility is raised that Lachie might have been gay. Liam vehemently denies this suggestion, while the brother of one of his friends snidely remarks that this would certainly have been a reason to kill oneself. Despite the closeness of the group of friends, it is evident that the rituals and signs through which they communicate with each other camouflage or stunt the emergence of something more meaningful. This is captured in Liam’s inability to handle any overt expression of emotion from his friends: ‘Lachie’s a really great bloke but he has days where he tries to bring you down with weird shit like this … The fucker’s always acting like his girlfriend or his dog died …’.77 It is also captured in one of Liam’s moments of insight about the convoluted handshakes that signify power play in the assertion of group and class identity: ‘we end up doing one of those stupid elaborate handshakes that involve a lot of thumb and forefinger action … and I don’t know the shit that guys do with guys … it’s some kind of power thing, like whoever controls the handshake has the advantage’.78
Conclusion

Duncan’s novel *Metro* is a timely reminder in an age of social anxiety and economic uncertainty that class, gender, sexuality and the urban imaginary can either reinvent themselves in more democratic and progressive ways or fall back on old models albeit with new technologies and modes of consumption. *Metro* strongly suggests the oppressive and repressive repercussions in pursuing the latter, but also indicates how easy it is, particularly for those with cultural and symbolic capital to get away with cleaving to their traditional power base. By the end of the narrative the gender order has been restored, but not without tragic consequences. One character has committed suicide, another has been violently attacked for an honest expression of his homosexual desire, while Liam, the main protagonist, opts for a life of success and privilege that will effectively deny him and others like him, an opportunity to be other than a ‘carbon copy’ of his class.

2 Soja’s urban imaginary ‘refers to our mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretive grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate, and decide to act in the places, spaces, and communities in which we live’ Edward Soja, *Postmetropolis: critical studies of cities and regions*. Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2000, p. 324.
3 Soja *Postmetropolis*, p. 324.
6 Duncan, *Metro*, p. 11.
11 Toby Miller Interview, 2006.
12 Queer is used in many forms and contexts. Miller’s use is as an umbrella term for non-normative gender identities, rather than as a position of destabilisation which exposes the constructed nature of gender/identity categories. Toby Miller Interview 2006.
13 Elizabeth Ferrier, quoted in Toby Miller interview.
16 Duncan, *Metro*, p. 11.
17 James Donald points to the significance of representation and the symbolic in the public’s understanding and experience of the city. He writes:

How the city is narrated in novels – the structure and form of the genre – disseminates certain perspectives, certain ways of seeing, and so certain structures of imagination... The relation between the novel and the city, then, is not merely one of representation. The text is actively constitutive of the
city. Writing does not only record or reflect the fact of the city. It has its role in producing the city for a reading public.


19 Duncan, *Metro*, p. 79.


28 Baudrillard in *Postmodern* p. 327.


31 Featherstone, ‘The body in consumer culture’


36 Friedman, ‘Border Talk’


38 Duncan, *Metro*, p. 147.


42 Duncan, *Metro*, p. 117.

43 Duncan, *Metro*, p. 117.

44 Duncan, *Metro*, p. 117.

45 Duncan, *Metro*, p. 117.


51 Featherstone, ‘The body in consumer culture’.


53 Toby Miller Interview.

54 Toby Miller Interview.


69 Duncan, *Metro*, p. 46.
70 Ian Chamberlain in Soja, *Postmetropolis*, p. 325.
74 From an unpublished interview with Alasdair Duncan, Holliday and Muller, 2006.
78 Duncan, *Metro*, p. 16.