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**Butterfly – The dark fluidity of suburban life**

**What is this research about?**

This paper is from a larger PhD research project which argues that contemporary fictional representations of Melbourne’s inner and outer suburban spaces are bringing into sharper focus the complexity of the suburban space and in particular what de Certeau describes as the unofficial or hidden city.

**What am I arguing?**

Through a combined lens of De Certeau’s work on the concept city and Virginia Woolf’s idea of psychological fluidity, in this paper I argue that via the actions and perspectives of the characters, the outer 1980s Melbourne suburb in Sonya Hartnett’s novel *Butterfly* is defined as a space of dark fluidity for the female characters.

**What do I mean by the concept city and the suburban space of dark fluidity?**

**De Certeau**

In his focus on the psycho-spatial nature of everyday life, De Certeau refers to the ‘hidden city’ which is where the strangeness of everyday life occurs; it is a “migrational, or metaphorical, city [that] slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” which is also known as the concept city (de Certeau: 2003: 151). In *Butterfly* the hidden city is the outer Melbourne suburb where the main protagonist, 14 year old Plum Coyle and her family live and in which the complexity and strangeness of everyday life occurs. Moreover the ‘hidden city’/hidden suburb of Hartnett’s text is one which is often dark and disturbing and much of this is driven by Plum’s restless desires and her discontent with the suburban ‘dream’. As a result Plum and the other characters turn their disadvantage around by finding new ways of “operating” and “making do” (30) through various strategies and tactics. The work of De Certeau is amended in this context to apply to the suburban environment.
portrayed in *Butterfly* as the inhabitants introduce alternative “types of operation” (30) and thus contribute towards a more fluid but also to what this paper is calling a ‘dark’ suburban space. The idea of a dark fluidity is borrowed from Virginia Woolf who explored the concept of psychological fluidity in literature drawing on “dark places of psychology”. Maria Jesus Lopez Sanchez-(Visca ino)Vizcaino explains Woolf’s ideas:

> this new vision implied a conception of the mind as a three-dimensional space divided into two basic levels, “the upper” and “the under” (Woolf, Essays 163), the surface on top and the room behind it. Internal and psychological processes, as described by Woolf throughout her fiction, are usually built upon the notion of the mind as a container, and of thoughts, ideas, sensations or dreams as the elements contained in it (Woolf in Sanchez-Vizcaino, 2007).

Harnett’s major fictional tactic in *Butterfly* is, like that of Virginia Woolf, to expose “the under”, and it is most often the characters’ interactions with the various spaces of the domestic environment that facilitate this process. Moreover “the under” (hidden dreams, desires, discontents) for many of the characters in the text, is revealed as having a darker aspect, in that when it emerges and is acted upon, - is rarely without some cost to the character or those in close proximity to the character.

Characters display signs of depression, narcissism and melancholy which are subsequently “managed” by the use of alcohol, drugs, illicit affairs (Maureen and Justin), materialism and detached parenting skills (Mums and Fa). In naming “the under” as a “dark fluidity”, this paper acknowledges that Harnett’s portrayal of suburbia is a complex one that recognises the significance of lived spatiality, that is the idea that spaces act upon individuals as much as individuals act upon spaces. In probing this relationship, Harnett reveals that the consequences of individuals negotiating a freer and more “creative” space within the “constraining order of place” as De Certeau suggests, are not always without an exacting, even tragic, price.

As a result the outer Melbourne suburb in *Butterfly* is a site of instability and change. The narrative reveals a tension between what De Certeau suggests is “the constraining order of the place” (30) (here the outer suburban environment) and the desires of characters which unsettle it through various tactics and strategies. The female characters, 14 year old Plum
Coyle, her mother, mums and their thirty something married next door neighbour Maureen Wilkes, are the focus of this analysis.

In *Butterfly*, there are several layers of “ideals’ embedded at the concept city level (Melbourne) which are aggravating the desires of the female characters in the hidden city (the outer unnamed suburb of Melbourne where Plum and her family live). Through their actions we see how for over 100 years the concept city had placed expectations upon women within the home without really acknowledging the difference between women and women’s experiences of suburban living. Hartnett’s characters antagonise the “ideals” of this space in ways which also suggest there is often a cost for inhabiting it.

**So what were the ideals of the 1880s concept city?**

Underpinning the development of the 1880s Melbourne suburb were some very clear planning ideals and goals established by the founding fathers of the day around the lives of women. In particular, the suburb writes Graeme Davison was constructed as a safe “place of escape or refuge” (Davison 2011: 26). In Melbourne a detached home, garden and privacy represented this idyll where women raised children and men retreated to at the end of the work day. In *Butterfly*, this is the pattern of home life as Mums and Maureen perform domestic work at home, while their husbands Fa and Bernie (Mr Wilks) work away from the family home. This “order” also provided a social script for men where a white man’s status was determined by his financial success, occupation and material wealth (101). For women, the ideal suburban retreat, according to Protestant Evangelicals, resembled “a kind of temple in which the wife ruled as the ‘Angel of the Home’” (Graeme Davison 2011: 27).

*Butterfly’s* outer suburb is modelled on the foundation ideals of a century before; the house is still detached with a garden on the ¼ acre block and privacy is still held in high regard although now to the extent that Plum’s family hardly know their neighbours. The adult female characters – Plum’s mother and next door neighbour Maureen are full time domestics who stay at home and “keep house”.

Judy Giles (2004) suggests that during the twentieth century, suggests there was a shift in advertising towards women as primary consumers which became focused on “their
[perceived] needs and aspirations. Shopping for the home became one of the key tasks of the twentieth-century housewife.” (138). This development had major implications for how women saw themselves in the home.

Giles cites three major influences on why this link between women and consumerism developed: social status was linked to “the purchase of domestic commodities and it was the job of middle-class women to create the ‘ideal’ homes that created this cultural capital” (138). Second the growing importance of women’s magazines financed by advertisers provided a “wider range of femininities from which to fashion identities” (Giles 2004:138) and thirdly “the increased focus of the home” was crucial to the survival of the nation that found its apotheosis in Second World War propaganda” (138).

Plum Coyle’s description of life in a 1980s outer suburb of Melbourne, suggests that this physical space is slowly becoming out of step with larger social and cultural changes occurring in Australian society. These changes begin to unnerve those who live there in various ways although this is not always visible.

At nearly 14 years of age, Plum is already a complex character despite her approaching adolescence. A tomboy who is keen on science-fiction, through various tactics and strategies Plum is challenging 100 year old patriarchal planning around the “ideal” female in an outer Melbourne suburban space. She is self-harming by over-eating, has a strange relationship with her peers, an inappropriate friendship with her older next door neighbour and develops an aversion to outdoor spaces. She has already rejected her mother’s form of femininity (de Certeau: 9) by eschewing her mother’s religion, dress and domestic furnishings. As a result, Plum develops a series of dark strategies and tactics to improve what she perceives to be an unfair life in suburbia.

Through her teenage perspective, Plum reveals what many feminist geographers suggest is a lack of fluidity in terms of imagining the suburbs as “socio-spatial spaces” which are experienced differently by both the men and women who live there (Strong-Boag, Dyck, England and Johnson in Harris, 1999: 185). This teen is not, as her neighbour suggests, a modern “Rapunzel” waiting for a prince to rescue her recalling that “Rapunzel is her most-
scorned distressed damsel” (16) nor is she content with imagining a life in the domestic space like her “dowdy” mother. While the physical space of the home and surrounding environment may be causing Plum pain, even a neurosis of sorts, it is obvious she is uncomfortable with “traditional” expectations surrounding women in the home in outer suburban Melbourne.

And yet, from the first page of the novel, Plum is highly critical of her pre-pubescent body in a way which suggests an ongoing preoccupation with the female form to fit an ideal “type” in this suburban space. Visually dissecting each of her physical features in front of the bedroom mirror, Plum decides that her body has “been waylaid monstrously on the path to being grown” (2) with its: “thick black hair”, “greasy cheeks’ “scarlet lumps”, “hotly sunburned skin”, and “specks of blackness”(1). “nobody could love you” (2) she taunts the body with its spreading acne she feeds with the hidden Mars Bars from under her bed. The mirror image reflected back at Plum through “eyes the tarred tips of poison darts” (2) suggests that the ideal of the Angel is both outdated and even harmful in this suburban space and raises questions around Plum’s mental health.

Her irritation with the “Dowdy” (P) space of her parent’s home is also heightened when Plum is planning her 14th birthday celebrations. She has been swept up into the idea of “domestic modernity” (Giles 2004:138) by coveting a “miniature television in its globe of chrome flames… . The television is, without question, the most desirable item she’s ever seen” (Hartnett: 11). For Plum, this item represents the key to solving all her problems and in her bedroom she play-acts watching this imaginary television: “she has constructed a new and entirely perfect life around something that is, in reality, as unattainable as Everest’s peak.” (12).

As a result of this spatial claustrophobia Plumb devises a series of tactics to negate the cloying impact of her suburban lifestyle. Plum enters into strategic relationships with other females, cultivating favour with the much older Maureen wanting “the angel to look at her with pride’ (73). For Plum, they all offer the promise, if only by osmosis, of beauty, a modern lifestyle and an escape from the one she painfully endures.

On a darker level, Plum has developed a secret collection of “artefacts” or objects stolen from her friends that are hidden under her bed in an old leather briefcase once belonging to her grandfather. In this sense Plum also reappropriates pre-used goods like her mother
does. Within the order of the established system, Plum establishes a new way of doing things (de Certeau: 108) by practising a crude type of “voodoo” and consumerism as she ritually takes the case out from under her bed with the gravitas one might afford rare or holy objects:

She gazes upon the case’s contents with an archaeologist’s eye: here lies her treasure, her most sacred things. She has lined the briefcase with lavender satin and provided several bags’ worth of cottonball cushioning so that each token sits within its own bulky cloud, untroubled by her manhandling of the case. (13)

MUMS

Mums however, is more reticent in portraying the modern housewife depicted by Giles. While there is no doubt that she is a keen consumer of goods for her home, most are purchased on her terms which means that she strategically bypasses the relationship between the female consumer and advertisers. This involves trawling the second hand shop with Fa finding objects based upon their quirkiness or usefulness. Mums does not appear concerned by the concept that she is expected to create an “ideal” home. (138). By eschewing the desire for social status based upon material objects and modern domesticity, Mums shows that some women “cannot be bought with money and commodities” (Giles: 126). Mums may appear to lack a sense of self awareness in her domestic space, but Soja reminds us that space is never “an empty void” (Soja 2010:19) and “attempts to make changes in our existing spatial configurations … do not express innocent or universally held objectives” (Soja 2010: 19). Instead Mums has created a domestic environment which challenges traditionally held assumptions around gender roles within the home. This environment provides a stable, nurturing environment for her children and her husband and suggests a traditional idea of family embedded within a modern suburban environment. The furniture and bric-a-brac hark back to an earlier period of Australian homelife and her rural heritage:

Nothing in the house is new: indeed, the more elderly an object, the more Mums and Fa must possess it. On weekends they trawl antique shops, returning with chairs and statues and complicated wooden boxes. (p). Even Mums’s taste in music harks back to another era. But what is more revealing is how Mums chooses to keep her pleasure of listening to herself and for reasons not revealed to Plum and the family: “Plum will never ask her mother what she thinks about when she’s alone in the house and it’s raining, those cold afternoons when Plum arrives home to find Elvis gazing up from record sleeves shuffled over the floor” (8). By keeping some things to herself perhaps Mums manages to offset the dark fluidity experienced by Plum and Maureen. Bypassing the need for a modern home environment filled with new domestic appliances, enables Mums to enjoy a relationship with Fa that is built around
mutual interests: “On weekends they trawl antique ships, returning with chairs and statues and complicated wooden boxes.” (3

Because she manages to avoid the trap of modern consumerism and arbitrarily performing the role of the “Angel in the home” does not mean that Mums is happy and living without a sense of the underlying darkness experienced by Maureen and Plum. Hers is a more controlled and practical approach to living in her outer suburban environment in Melbourne but there is, as Cyder picks up on, a sense of wanting more:

He’s always thought that Mums could have lived happily without her offspring—there are many things she’s interested in besides them. She is what Cydar is, a distant heart, and her children and husband are things she chooses to tolerate, like rare parrots nesting in the chimney. Whenthe boy looks at Mums, however, Cydar feels something strike in her—something too hot and too tender, a thing that makes his mother look away. Wishing, Cydar sees. And in his tightly stoned state he has a profound realisation: Everyone in his family is sad. Mums and Fa, living lives that never managed to rise above the ordinary. (Hartnett: 98).

MAUREEN

Louise Johnson suggests that the type of modern suburban lifestyle coveted by Plum is often viewed by Marxist and feminist critiques of suburbia as “expressing or enhancing middle class affluence, generating wasteful consumption or constraining in the aspirations of women” (1993: 202). This certainly is the case for Maureen Wilks who has embraced modernity and domestic consumerism and is keen on replicating the lifestyles that she sees in her home-styling magazines. Maureen also equates modern consumerism with the promise of a better life—and in this case with her much younger neighbour Justin Coyle.

A bright woman, Maureen feels unfulfilled staying at home minding her 4 year old son David on a full time basis and is a woman out of step with her environment. Her brick veneer home with its neat garden is derived from a design which catered to a colonial family’s needs during the early development of suburban Melbourne. For example to cope with outdated patriarchal “rules” of the planned suburb Maureen adopts a strategy of hyper-consumerism. By filling her home with modern furnishings Maureen reflects the life that she aspires to live with Justin in the contemporary city of Berlin: it is a life without children,
defined gender roles and suburban routines. It is a life taken straight from the pages of her lifestyle magazines:

Perhaps it is no co-incidence that the name Maureen is a version of Mary and in Irish it can mean “bitter”. Maureen is not as Plum soon realises the self-sacrificing mother Mums is. Maureen wears motherhood like one of her beautiful outfits; stepping in and out of the role depending on her audience. Like a caged animal, late at night she stalks the perimeters of her home, in her elegant pantsuit or fashionable maxi, she is pushing at the boundaries of her oppressive space and the restricting “Angel” role the public patriarchal order has imposed for so long. When Maureen squashes a gnat on her throat: “Maureen’s searching fingers have crushed the midge into a paste, and the sight of the mess on the graceful throat is disturbing and somehow disappointing,” for Plum, (Hartnett: 86) though she is not quite sure why. In contrast to Plum’s traditional “mums”, Maureen projects a perfect image no matter the time of day or situation. And yet she is a contradiction in so many ways; while having an affair with Justin she appears to still enjoy her husband’s company (82): “The two of them sit on the lawn with glasses and red wine, and Maureen laughs loudly, warning Plum she’s not alone”. While encouraging Plum to engage in silly acts such as discarding her lunch, she also offers her pearls of wisdom: “Human beings change, who you are now, is not the person you’ll be in a few years” (86).

Plum’s superficial adoration of Maureen sees Maureen objectified by Plum like one of the precious objects in her hidden suitcase as both women enter into a strategic partnership as “sisters” (27). This sisterhood goes against all the traditional rules such a bond might bring as Maureen and Plum form an alliance that will unwittingly bring out the worst in them, a hidden darkness not traditionally associated with women in the suburban environment. From the beginning Maureen attempts to influence the socially awkward Plum and impose her dissatisfaction with suburban life on the girl by likening her, to the teen’s initial disgust, to Rapunzel. While Maureen spends her days strategically waiting for Justin to rescue her out of her suburban prison, Plum dreams of taking herself out of the suburb and therein lays the difference between these two: “’If people aren’t happy with what they have’, she tries, ‘they should just change things, until they have what they want.’”(27) Plum advises the older woman. “I just wish it were that simple, Plum-maybe it is, and I just haven’t realised” replies Maureen. Gillian Rose (1993) has suggested “Space almost becomes like an enemy itself” (143) particularly in relation to the domestic space. Maureen’s enemy is her domestic space where she experiences a strong sense of confinement at both a physical level – performing and dressing for the male gaze (Rose: 145) - and at the psychological level. Maureen’s inability to remove herself from what she perceives to be an oppressive space is eventually resolved through her own operational schema involving tactics to subordinate Justin: “The
best way is to be forthright from the start – to craft him into who she wants him to be while he is still blind, as men always go blind.” (167).

Historically, there has been a sense of “method and order” (Ashton 2008: 42) associated with the suburban domestic life along with a neatness of mind and spirit all of which Sonya Hartnett challenges through the psychological thoughts, musings and actions of her characters. De Certeau says a tactic is the action of an individual who makes use of their time infiltrating strategies of the “proper” and Maureen Wilkes’ cool exterior and ordered existence belies a state of mind which is beginning to slowly unravel as she realises that Justin, on whom she has pinned all her hopes of escape from the suburb, begins to retreat from her. Coolly she observes him like he is her prey as all her senses warn her of his changing heart; she freezes “‘alert to the slightest change in pressure’. Is something wrong?’”(96) She asks. As “Maureen’s blood begins to pump she “steps back, raising stringent eyebrows-she knows the effect is like brandishing knives. If she had a knife she would aim him at him, not threateningly but enough to illustrate how close he’s come to hurting her feelings” (96).

When her relationships with Justin and Plum are severed, Maureen behaves in a way which suggests that the fluidity of her space or “way of using the constraining order of the place” (de Certeau 2003: 108) has impacted her with “dark consequences” (de Certeau 2013: 108). Instead of punishing Plumb and Justin, Maureen takes out her grievances on David. Like the vengeful Medea in Euripedes’ Greek tragedy who is spurned by Jason, Maureen commits the most heinous of crimes by putting herself above her child. Whether she actually murders the young boy or not is almost irrelevant as the ensuing monologue suggests that something has given in Maureen in much the same way that Cyder notices about his family:

Routes close, options shrivel, and it all happens without fanfare, simply day following – until, suddenly, life is no longer pliable, and becomes like a frieze on a nursery wall, the same thing over and over. Maureen had not realised, and now she’s paying or ignorance. Her fault is that she’d thought life was fairer, more generous, less rigid, that’s all.

‘Where’s Daddy?’ Asks the boy; ‘Shush,’ says Maureen. She’s made of glass tonight – a very thin glass forced to contain a substance as repugnant as tar. (212)
CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that the Melbourne suburb in *Butterfly* is not one monolithic or static space. Hartnett reveals the complexity of the term, just as she reveals the complexity of the lives that are lived there. In his focus on the psycho-spatial nature of everyday life, De Certeau refers to the ‘hidden city’ which is where the strangeness of everyday life occurs; it is a “migrational, or metaphorical, city [that] slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (de Certeau: 2003: 151). In *Butterfly* the hidden city is the outer Melbourne suburb where Plum Coyle and her family live and in which the complexity and strangeness of everyday life occurs. Moreover the ‘hidden city’/hidden suburb of Hartnett’s text is one which is often dark and disturbing and much of this is driven by Plum’s restless desires, her discontent with the suburban ‘dream’. As a result Plum and the other characters turn their disadvantage around by finding new ways of “operating” and “making do” (30) through various strategies and tactics. The following quote from De Certeau is amended to apply to the suburban environment portrayed in *Butterfly* as the inhabitants introduce alternative “types of operation” (30) and thus contribute towards a more fluid but also to what this chapter is calling a ‘dark’ suburban space: