Australian Suburban Imaginaries of Nature: Towards a prospective history

by Aidan Davison

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Even naturalists are uninterested in pigeons
Who loiter everywhere in the cities,
Birds who have sullied themselves
By learning to live with man...

Baron Wormser

In everything from wilderness documentaries and ecotourism developments to the advertising of real estate and shampoo, contemporary forms of symbolic convergence between nature and the good life have complex and historically deep sources. Within this broad subject, the question of what lessons can be learnt about present imaginaries of nature from Australia's remarkable suburban history is an intriguing one. I concentrate on two - of, no doubt, several - instructive possibilities here. First, I suggest that private dreams of Edenic harmony with and social autonomy in domestic nature were not only prominent during the first century of Australian suburbanisation (roughly, 1850 to 1950), they operated as a counterweight to public dreams of technological dominion over raw nature in the creation of Australian modernity. Second, I propose that growing disenchchantment with and anxiety about the technological reality of suburban Eden during and since the post-war 'boom' is an important and overlooked element in processes by which post-war environmental movements and, latterly, wider culture have re-
imagined and re-lived dreams of refuge in nature through the figure of wilderness.

Inquiry into the twentieth century rise of wilderness as the dominant imaginary of authentic nature in the suburbanised nations of North America and Australia is well advanced (Botkin 2001; Cronon 1996; Flanagan 1992; Hutton & Connors 1999; Plumwood 1998; Schmitt 1990; Sutter 2002). Less attention has been given to related processes by which, first, urban and, later, suburban forms of nature have been imagined to be somehow illegitimate in these settler societies (an important Australian exception here is Seddon 1970, 1997; see Hogan 2003). The idea of urban nature has been unworkably dissonant and largely absent from Australian academic and public discourse. Like the poet of the epigraph above, I find disturbing the assumption that a Midas touch inevitably traps inhabitants of the city, human and non-human alike, in a state of alienation from nature. Informed by Cartesian nature/culture dualism and energised by Romanticist distaste for the industrial city (Fishman 1987; Williams 1973), this assumption played an important part in motivating suburban attempts to claim refuge in the benign nature of the 'garden' at the margins of the city. In keeping with the irony of Midas' plight of poverty in riches, these attempts are today roundly criticised by many for only accelerating and extending the destruction of nature wrought by the city (e.g., Newman & Kenworthy 1999).

There are recent signs, however, that suburban nature is beginning to be thought as something other than an oxymoron in Australia. Tim Low (2002), for one, has found a receptive audience for claims that sub/urban environments are more ecologically resilient and adaptive than generally acknowledged (see also Lunney & Burgin 2004). The implications of such revisioning of ecological theory lie beyond the scope of the present paper. Instead, supported by efforts to revise social theory in light of questions about nature, efforts sketched out below, I inquire into the role of imaginaries of nature in the predominance of suburban forms of everyday life in Australian settler society.

**Natures: Plurality, Practice, Performance**

In explaining in this paper why the neglected topic of Australian suburban imaginaries of nature is worth greater attention, I join the struggle against what Sarah Whatmore calls 'the viscous terms in which the "question of nature" has been posed in the social sciences and humanities' (2002, 1). Keen to avoid stodgy debates that pit realists and constructivists against one another, I take up the theme of suburban imaginaries of nature through an interest in the everyday practice or, better, the performance that sustains all cultural representations of nature. Put in general terms, my interest in questions of nature is in the interplay between materiality (e.g., suburban places, things, beings, processes, images) and representation (e.g., suburban discourses, dreams, desires, fears, imaginings). To
avoid being misunderstood as yet another who would collapse the vastness, purposefulness and inexpressible difference of other-than-human reality into a sub-category of culture, I venture a brief methodological explanation of plurality, practice and performance in representations of nature.

Forms of nondualist social theory that take nature to be neither reducible to objective reality nor reducible to human subjectivity have been articulated with increasing confidence in the new millennium (Franklin 2002; Haraway 2003; Harrison et al. 2004; Latour 2004; Macnaghten & Urry 2001; Szerszynski et al. 2003; Whatmore 2002). With rhetorical strategies built around terminology such as contested natures, hybrid natures, technonatures and naturecultures, nature is being theorised as distinct from culture yet inseparably entangled with it in the many and shifting political collectives - the naturecultures - that arise in human encounters with their other-than-human world.

These strategies are linked, more or less explicitly, to a non-representational or performative "turn" in social theory which aims to apprehend the world as it is lived - i.e., as it is presented to thought in and through practice - rather than as it is thought per se - i.e., as it is represented in and through ideas. Perhaps most advanced, to date, within critical geography (e.g., Thrift 1996, 2004; Lorimer 2005) and sociology of science, especially actor-network theory (e.g., Latour 1999; Law 1992, 1999), such strategies are founded upon the claim that the world is not simply known through participation in it, but, because "practices constitute our sense of the real" (Thrift 1996, 7), the 'known world' is simultaneously revealed and created by our participation in it (a claim I consider more fully in A. Davison 2001). In this way, contemporary experiments in non-representational theory are indebted to a range of post-positivist trajectories in twentieth century philosophy, such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, pragmatism and feminism, which sought to position the body, agency, praxis and practical reason at the centre of questions of knowledge (e.g., Bernstein 1983).

Theoretical interest in the performance of nature is just getting underway (Szerszynski et al. 2003). More generally, however, performance is already a "central motif in the social sciences and humanities," and not all variations upon this theme are suited to questions of nature (Thrift & Dewsbury 2000, 411). Judith Butler's well-known study of gender, for example, concentrates on symbolic and discursive performance, rather than embodied practices, and addresses only human agency (Thrift & Dewsbury 2000). In contrast, I wish to use the motif of performance to keep visible the movement, interplay and coupling of human and other-than-human agency in cultural imaginaries of nature. Nature is not produced by human agents (Plumwood 2001), but neither is it found by them. Nature is performed by human agents in a dance with other-than-human agency: a dance, of necessity, partially improvised as well as partially scripted on the palimpsests of
ecology and society.

I advocate this understanding of nature as a participant in environmental movements aware that some environmentalists are likely to be troubled by attempts to 'unearth' forms of cultural performance in discourses of environmental crisis and wilderness (Cronon 1996). Given that Western environmentalism has been built around rock solid conviction that the 'major problems in the world are the result of the difference between the way nature works and the way man thinks' (Bateson, cited in Devall & Sessions 1986, 1) such unease is hardly surprising. Attempts to mess up fixed boundaries between culture and nature, and between technology and ecology, have been met by many nature advocates with deep suspicion (Callicott & Nelson 1998). Partly as a result of such suspicion, the study of environmental philosophy has been preoccupied with pure and categorical Nature, rather than with the artefactual, and especially sub/urban, natures in which the majority of these scholars and their contemporaries live (Kirkman 2004; Light 2001).

Yet it is no more advisable to rely upon the figure of pure nature to provide a fixed reference point beyond culture by which to chart the decline - the unsustainability - of Australian settler society, than it was to rely upon the figure of raw nature in earlier misguided attempts to chart its progress. Undeniably, an appreciation of the cultural partiality, particularity and experimentality of nature discourses complicates political struggles organized around the battle lines of defense and development of nature. But such an appreciation does not inherently undermine environmentalist objectives or require that the figure of nature be dispensed with (Plumwood 2001). Nor does the pluralism it encourages lead inevitably to moral and political relativism. To be interested in the cultural performance of nature is not to deny the explanatory power of scientific description of ecological problems, for example. It is, however, to be skeptical of attempts to use science to trump other cultural forms of knowing nature, and of claims that scientific explanations are not socially contingent, diverse and, often, internally contradictory; that they are not, in short, themselves elaborate cultural productions. Greater awareness of the socio-cultural content of claims about and interests located in nature increases the possibility that political conflict mobilized around nature can be mediated and arbitrated through participatory democratic methods. While such methods are often espoused by nature advocates they have been rarely successful in the polarizing conditions created by the clash of incommensurable universal claims about nature. Given that the majority of the Australian population make their home in suburbs-- and given that 'both erstwhile critics and defenders of Australian suburbia have yet to really grasp its novelty and complexity as a social imaginary' (Hogan 2003, 61) -- the task of democratic transition towards ecological sustainability brings with it a need to study more closely the imaginaries of nature that have both helped constitute and
been constituted by these environments.

**Suburban Frontiers**

Australian settler society has been profoundly suburbanised since at least the turn of the twentieth century when it was declared the world's most suburban society (G. Davison 1997). Somewhere in the order of 70% of Australians now live in suburban environments (ABS 2003, 2005; O'Connor & Healy 2004; Salt 2001). From the standpoint of physical geography such an observation offers a straightforward statement of fact, although suburban form is increasingly difficult to define as today's cities mingle past and present suburban experiments in complex ways. The noun 'suburb' is used in ever-looser fashion to denote a growing variety of landscapes, often although not always predominated by detached housing, that lie beyond urban centres but that are nonetheless integral to the functioning of the urban whole. On top of this, the adjective 'suburban' introduces further complexity as it shifts attention to the diverse, historically layered and ambivalent cultural geographies embodied in suburban environments. Plural and evaluative in its meanings, 'suburban' defies easy definition and takes discourse beyond narrow constrictions of objectivity. It confuses an easy separation of social cause and effect, or of structure and agency. The inference that to be sub-urban is to be less than or beneath the urban harks back to the origins of this term as a reference to the depraved and lowly inhabitants of the slums that ringed medieval London (Fishman 1987). With many dictionaries continuing to record this term as pejorative, the scholarly study of suburban ideals and practices takes place amidst considerable semantic confusion.

Despite this confusion, suburbs are more or less tacitly understood in Australia as an enactment of the Great Australian Dream of affluence, independence, privacy and security: an Anglo-centric dream of certainty in a new world characterised above all by flux. Unlike other essentially bourgeois suburban frontiers, such as Britain and North America, this dream was shaped by strong proletarian influences and democratic impulses from early on in Australia. A range of socio-economic and cultural phenomena combined to make private ownership of house and land, and the social autonomy they made possible, widely available and strongly desirable (G. Davison 1995; Mullins 1981). Victoria's Attorney-General of the 1920s, F. W. Eggleston, put it aptly: the early-Australian suburb was the dream of 'self-contained man' (1932, 330-1). This autonomy was as much environmental as expressly political and made possible by intensive systems of domestic production, such as backyard agriculture and waste management, home and furniture building and repair, clothes-making and food preserving (Hogan 2003). A prosaic dream, then, founded, so Robert Menzies asserted in the midst of the insecurities of the Second World War, and between his two stints as Prime Minister, on the instinct 'which induces us to have one little piece of earth with a
house and a garden which is ours, to which we can withdraw, in which we can be among friends, into which no stranger may come against our will' (1992 [1942], 7-8). Menzies understood, arguably better than any Australian politician before or since, the potential of the experience of autonomy through land ownership to shape Australian nation-building. In the hope of entrenching conservative, Anglo-centric political ideals and further strengthening symbolic linkages between private and national borders during a period of mass-immigration, Menzies government oversaw a dramatic increase in home ownership from 53% of the total housing stock in 1947 to its historical peak of 71% in 1966 (Troy 2000, 719).

Notwithstanding their democratic credentials (or perhaps because of them), suburbs had heaped upon them throughout the twentieth century the scorn of intellectuals and aesthetes enraged by their banality and insularity; their moral vacuity; their petite-bourgeois pretensions; their fundamental ugliness (Gilbert 1988). During the 1970s, anti-suburban energies shifted from aesthetics to politics. A coalition of social movements denounced suburban ideals as sources of sexism, racism, classism, consumerism and anti-environmentalism (Johnson 2003). Joining the anti-suburban fray, post-war environmental movements have frequently collapsed into the comfortable postures of physical determinism, presenting suburbanised cities not as a collective and conscious democratic project, founded upon deliberate aspirations, but as a default position of apathy set by the structures of environment, capital and technology. A recent example of such determinism can be found in Robert Riddell’s Sustainable Urban Planning:

Given a plot-house-car lifestyle structure as dominant, plot-holding, home-owning, appliance-operating and car-running concerns take over suburban lives, pattern their consumption and condition their thinking. The living-consuming-thinking pattern which has evolved is defined by child needs (pap food), child pleasure (low-gratification television), and child consumerism (plaything cars and dinky houses) (Riddell 2004, 194).

In addition to being patronising, environmentalist imagination in this vein homogenises the heterogeneous reality of twenty-first century suburban forms of life, assuming them to be in some unspecified way inherently unsustainable in ways rural and urban forms of life are not. Not even the infamously elastic rhetoric of sustainability, that has comfortably accommodated the glib formula of sustainable development, has stretched to include substantial discussion of ‘suburban sustainability’, apparently finding this idea just too gross an oxymoron. Ironically, however, the visions of nature that have helped shape such post-war
environmental concerns bear a significant debt to the history of suburban ideals.

**Suburban Refuge: the first boom**

The cultural performance of nature was central to the first and less well known of Australia's two suburban booms. From 1881 to 1891 the population of Melbourne, then the largest antipodean city, increased by 77% to 473 000 (G. Davison 1978, 7). Sydney's population, displaying remarkable symmetry, given the isolation of the colonies, increased 78% to 400 000 (McCarty 1974, 21). In a further display of symmetry, the city centres of Sydney and Melbourne each accounted for only 4% of this population growth as suburban impulses continually pushed the boundaries of the city outwards (McCarty 1974, 27; Weber 1967[1899], 472). By the time the recession of the 1890s took hold, Melbourne stretched over an area of 164 000 acres with an average population density of three people per acre. Sydney averaged four people per acre in its older and marginally more compact form over 96 000 acres (Weber 1967[1899], 139). An appreciation of the relative scale of this brief but intense period of suburbanisation can be gained by considering that Australia's second, longer suburban boom saw the populations of Melbourne and Sydney increase 92% and 65% respectively, over the 24 years from 1947 to 1971. Unlike the first boom, this second boom also involved a significant increase in population densities with Melbourne and Sydney housing 7.5 and 7.7 people per acre respectively by 1966 (Burnley 1974, 13-14).

Such statistics do not by themselves convey the extent and radical character of Australian experiments with the form, function and meaning of cities. Nor do they convey the ways in which these experiments equally refashioned the form, function and meaning of Australian natures. Unlike the first modern suburbs - those of eighteenth century London (Fishman 1987) - Australian suburbs were not lodged between city and country, but developed as an unprecedented form of settlement in their own right. Well before 'garden city' ideals were fashionable, these were truly suburban cities in which the 'capitals developed suburbs before their centres were built up' (Frost & Dingle 1995, 21). As early as 1788, in the first months of settlement, Arthur Phillip, Governor of New South Wales, wrote of his (only partially implemented) plan that 'land will be granted with a clause that will prevent more than one house being built on the allotment, which will be sixty feet in front and one hundred and fifty feet in depth' (Phillip cited in G. Davison 1995, 43).

The suburban orientation of the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century resulted from the interaction of pro-urban and anti-urban forces. Mercantile capitalism, bureaucratic colonialism and Enlightenment rationalism produced decidedly urban imperatives. These imperatives met strong resistance, resistance that Graeme Davison (1997) identifies as coming from four distinct sources. First,
evangelicalism, the foremost early Christian influence in the colonies, responded to the emerging modern separation of political and religious authority by emphasising the religious significance of the family home. In juxtaposing male moral responsibility for social improvement—responsibilities centred in the city—with the spiritual innocence of women and children—innocence endangered by the venal energies of the city—Protestantism more generally played an important role in motivating suburban experiments throughout the British Empire (Fishman 1987). Second, sanitarism, ‘the new science of public health’ (G. Davison 1997, 12), built upon settler’s memories of the parlous state of British urban environments during the early decades of industrialisation to present suburban spaciousness as the solution to urban disease and decay. Third, romanticism emphasised the aesthetic and spiritual importance of the ‘garden’ as a sanctuary in which ‘people might seek refuge from the artificiality and noise of the city amidst the quiet and beauty of nature’ (G. Davison 1997, 12). Finally, weakening of pre-modern class-distinctions based on birth made the social mixing created by cities increasingly problematic and the suburb increasingly important as a means of spatial segregation in emerging forms of capitalist stratification.

Australian cities were simultaneously the products of and the producers of intense ambivalence, contradiction and paradox. Far from being prosaic and banal, suburban landscapes evolved as important sites for embodying ambivalence in the historical negotiation of the project of rational progress in Australia. By the end of the nineteenth century, the second most urbanised society in the world (after Britain) was to be found in Australia. Yet at the same time its citizenry was busily engaged in singing, writing and drawing itself into existence through the rustic, and patriarchal, figures of the bushman, the drover, the prospector and the farmer (Devlin-Glass 1994). Through these roles nature was performed in narratives of the bush, the outback and the remote centre, this despite the population's predominantly coastal as well as urban geography. Through these roles, the Australian continent was transformed in the imaginations of settlers over the course of the first century of settlement from alien to distinctive; from actively inhospitable to demanding but approachable for those with the toughness of character to tolerate its obstinate ways. The Anglo-centric imagining of a distinctively Australian nature, one that defined and unified the continent and its islands, helped facilitate federation of the self-governing Australian colonies in 1901. The appearance of the kangaroo and emu on the new nation’s crest was far from incidental, or inevitable (Franklin 2005).

As Chris McAuliffe (1996) has observed, the paradoxical power of pastoral images of nature in conditions of rapid suburbanisation is strikingly evident in the paintings of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Heidelberg School (also Astbury 1985; Smith 1976).
Working in the shadow of new suburban subdivisions, the Heidelberg School painters chose to represent Australian culture through pastoral and bush myths. Like their contemporaries in poetry and literature (especially Henry Lawson and ‘Banjo’ Patterson), Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, Frederick McCubbin and Charles Conder associated the city with materialism, conformity and the debilitating side effects of industrialisation. And yet the Heidelberg School artists were no bushmen; they painted for an urban audience, conforming to urban ideologies (McAuliffe 1996, 46).

Now a middle-ring leafy suburb of Melbourne, Heidelberg, after which the work of these painters was named, was already in the sights of land speculators during the first suburban boom. A place of ‘pastoral dreamy loveliness’ (Streeton cited in McAuliffe 1996, 46), Heidelberg in the 1880s was an popular setting for Melbourne’s middle-class, picnickers and painters alike, who fashioned their imagination of Australian identity, with its requisite backdrop of Australian nature, out of brief bush escapes from hectic sub/urban lives.

McCubbin’s Winter Evening, Hawthorn (Image 1) is instructive. Painted in the middle of the first suburban boom, the City of Melbourne appears as muted, brooding and ill-defined background to the honeyed tones of the bushman’s world of nature performed as benign if dry and unkempt pastoral land. Yet this was no bushman’s world. Hawthorn was a bustling suburb, whose population of six thousand clustered around the rail line providing easy access to and escape from the city (McAuliffe 1996, 46); a city whose treeless and densely built expanse in the 1880s was caught by the camera of Charles Bristow Walker (Image 2). With their homes safely cosseted from the noise, dirt and crowds of the city, both working and middle class suburbanites took great pride in the rapid, gold-fed metamorphosis of Melbourne from a small town in 1850 into an international centre of commerce and culture that in 1890 hosted a lavish international exhibition of its achievements (G. Davison 1978).

McCubbin permits only the merest glimpse of the suburban future that was fast arriving in places like Hawthorn, on the hillside beneath the bushman’s rustic cottage. Yet, like many other artists who have brought anti-urban imagination to the task of imaging Australia’s socio-natural essence, McCubbin unwittingly provides an intensely suburban vision. In celebrating the lone pioneer whose house sits tranquil isolation in the shade of gum trees yet within easy reach of the energies and opportunities of the city, McCubbin implicitly imaged suburban desires familiar to many twenty-first century Australians, especially the growing number who continue to move towards the edge of the cities in search of space, peace and beauty. He represented the settler’s enduring desire to hold onto a
meaningful past authored by God, nature, community and tradition (and first performed in another place), while claiming also the riches that with came with the death of God, the domination of nature, the life of the mind and the restlessness of capitalism orchestrated by the modern city. In obscuring the dominant, prosaic reality of suburban life, this image offers an early example of "the creation and maintenance of a false consciousness of what it is to be an Australian" (Smith 1976, 292; also Hogan 2003) that was sustained by many Australian artists during the steady suburbanisation of Australian society over the following century.

![Image 1: Frederick McCubbin, Winter Evening, Hawthorn 1886. Oil on canvas, 51 x 76 cm. Castlemaine Art Gallery and Historical Museum, gift of J. T. Tweedle, 1926. Reproduced with permission.](image1)

Unlike elite artists such as McCubbin, the many commercial artists of the first suburban boom were in no position to leave suburban desire implicit. Thus we find an anonymous lithographer enthusiastically taking up the challenge of transforming the open pastures of West Brunswick into the Promised Land of Moses and Jacob for an advertising poster (Image 3). Today offering inner-suburban passage to Melbourne's CityLink Freeway, this land in the 1880s was the site of a proposed (and unrealised) subdivision of 164 tightly fitted suburban blocks of a little less than quarter of an acre each, without provision for public space and with a rail reserve running through its middle. Leaving little to the viewer's imagination, the lithographer's image is laced with unrestrained prose: 'A Paradise in Miniature, verily, verily! Eden Resuscitated! A Home for the Chosen People'. Continuing in only slightly less breathless fashion, we learn that this 'most perfect Sites [sic] of Rural Beauty to be found in Great Australia' is 'but 4.5 miles from the General Post Office... commanding views of City, Sea and Mountain almost oppressive in the bewildering beauty of their magnificence... [and served by] 102 trains daily' (Anon., cited in McAulifffe 1996, 17; see Merchant 2003 for a general discussion of Eden as redemptive myth).


Although exaggerated to the point of caricature, this image of 'Aesthetic Nature's Celestial rendezvous [sic]' recognisably encodes the four sources of anti-urbanism identified by Graeme Davison (1997). Biblical imagery revives the yearning for Eden as a quintessentially private desire for spiritual domestication in which nature is performed as an authentic mirror of its benevolent creator. The spacious and open landscape, bathed in strong but soft light and free of any untidy scrub, dubious wetland or urban grime, projects a vision of healthy vitality in which nature is performed as the archetype of cleanliness and order. The elevated and expansive perspective of gently rolling hills invokes the romanticist's performance
of nature as flowing scenery for the detached viewer alienated by the satanic excesses of technology. The distance of the 'Promised Land' from the city of Melbourne just visible on the horizon adds weight to the implication that this land is truly a 'Home for the Chosen People' (Anon., cited in McAuliffe 1996, 17) where nature performs the roles of nurturing human community and protecting it from the rattle of the city.

Strikingly similar images have remained routine fare up to the present in the real estate pages of Australian newspapers. Consider, for instance, an advertisement for a recent subdivision on the edge of Wynyard, a small country town a short drive from the city of Burnie in northern Tasmania (Image 4). We see how suburban ideals continue to redefine the geographical status of the city through phenomena such as aero-commuting—'only 2 minutes to the airport with approx. five daily flights to the mainland' (in this case, Melbourne)—and the 'suburb' (rural suburb)—populated by urban retirees enjoying views of 'playful whales frolicking in sparkling waters' in easy reach of '2 modern hospitals' (The Mercury, August 29, 2003, 25). Despite this novelty, the underlying ideals remain largely unchanged from earlier times. It is not difficult to find extortations still (such as this one accompanying an advertisement for a modest suburban home in Hobart) to 'escape from all the troubles that life can throw at you with your own private Eden on the fringes of society' (The Mercury, October 24, 2003, 8).


From suburbia to wilderness

Toward the end of his study of the history of the modern suburb, Bourgeois Utopias, Robert Fishman claimed that suburban desire has 'kept alive the ideal of a balance between man and nature in a society that seemed dedicated to destroying it. That is its legacy' (1987, 207). At first glance, this claim seems

peculiar. After all, postwar environmental movements, whose explicit rationale is precisely that of restoring balance between humanity and nature, have routinely imagined suburbs to be, not Eden reclaimed, but cancerous social growth in the body of nature. Yet, rather than undermining Fishman's claim this fact makes it all the more compelling. I have argued here that suburban practices can be understood as a broad category of cultural geography rather than one simply of physical geography. Understood in this way, this category draws together phenomena as varied as nineteenth century villa estates and post-war subdivisions to twenty-first century suburbs and gated vertical communities (of, for example, spacious apartments claiming water views at the vertical fringes of the city) that seek to transpose suburban practices into rural and urban keys. Suburban imaginaries have kept alive hopes of a uniquely modern reconciliation with nature as, all the while, suburban realities made such reconciliation increasingly difficult by greatly increasing the size, technological complexity and vulnerability, resource needs and waste streams of cities, thereby only intensifying the desire for escape from the city. 'There was a paradox in suburbanization,' observed Samuel Hays in his study of post-war American environmental politics, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*. The refuge in benign nature sought in the suburbs 'often soon became threatened by the increase in people, traffic, and pollution. The world seemed to close in and destroy what one had sought to secure. This experience shaped much environmental concern' (Hays 1987, 91).

While some -- notably, Adam Rome (2001) -- have followed Hays' cue and provided a detailed study of suburban sources of American environmentalism, Australian environmental social movements and their scholars have yet to take full account of the suburban paradox that may be at work within their concerns. In particular, little is known about how wilderness and suburbia may overlap in Australian imaginaries and their related everyday performances of nature. It is worth noting, however, that the majority of the population, and, thus, a goodly slice of the suburban population, now consider themselves to be "a bit of a greenie at heart" (Roy Morgan Research 2000; see also ABS 2004).

As noted earlier, there are significant differences between the suburban histories of North American and Australian societies. Nonetheless, the paradox observed by Hays can be seen in Australian suburban ambivalence toward the modern project of rational progress: a paradox that produces, for example, the not unfamiliar spectacle of environmentalist critiques of suburban 'sprawl' being launched from bush blocks in the commuter belts that gird Australian cities. During the 1950s and 1960s suburban imaginaries became inextricably joined to a 'suburban-industrial' complex of practices (Rome 2001, 15-43), a cultural performance that effectively translated the desire for refuge from rational progress into motives for autonomy through consumption, spurring technological production to an ever-higher tempo. The private car simultaneously fused suburb
firmly with city and drew wilderness within weekend suburban reach (Sutter 2002). From organochlorine residues in backyard sandpits to denuded landscapes where engines sang louder than any bird to garden plants that began to ‘invade’ the bush the benign nature of suburban Eden grew malevolent. Many subdivisions on the edge of the city may have lasted just long enough for many children within them to develop lasting affection for their local forest, creek or swamp only to then be dismayed and angered by the arrival of the next wave of bulldozers.

The experience of disenchantment with the reality of suburban Eden is an important and neglected element--although only one of several--in the compound processes by which wilderness shed connotations of risk, decay, disorder and unrealised potential and grew pure, perfect and sacrosanct in the environmental imagination of many Australians. Central to both wilderness and suburban ideals has been a yearning for escape from the haste and contrivance of the city toward a more expansive imagination of time and space, not to mention simplified social interaction, in which privacy, beauty and authenticity can be reclaimed. Of course, equally central to both has been the re-imagination of nature as a sphere of solace, leisure and adventure, rather than that of labour, capital and scarcity, which reflects a profoundly urban sensibility.

Australian society continues to disperse into the fringes of its cities. Despite long-standing criticism of suburbs by intellectuals and more recently by environmentalists advocating urban consolidation, and despite the shift towards non-nuclear family structures and increased ethnic and cultural diversity, suburban aspirations remain strong (Troy 2003; Wulff et al. 2004). Some 90 percent of Australians continue to aspire to own their own home (Wulff et al. 2004, 60), with a 2003 survey of 1700 Perth residents reporting that 94% of respondents found the prospect of living in a detached house attractive or very attractive, with 64% finding a block size of greater than 800 m$^2$, or 0.2 of an acre, (very) attractive (WA Government n.d.). Such research corresponds with findings that gardening remains the Australian recreation of first choice (Roy Morgan Research 2001). More generally, it corresponds with demographic analysis suggesting that, despite much publicised suburban exodus in search of cosmopolitan sophistication or Arcadian sea-change, suburbs seem likely to maintain their majority share of the Australian population for the foreseeable future (Salt 2001).

Suburban aspirations are not static and there are signs that post-war suburban yearnings for wild nature are beginning to be re-shaped by renewed interest in suburban natures. While Australia has a long tradition of urban environmental activism (Hutton & Connors 1999), such as the green union bans of the 1970s (Burgmann & Burgmann 1998) and urban permaculture movements (A. Davison 2006), the capacity of nature to ennoble and to orient culture has been located
outside of the city in post-war imaginaries of nature. The Australian Broadcasting Commission was, thus, caught by surprise when more that 27 000 people, the bulk from cities, responded to an invitation in April 2004 to take part in a WildWatch survey of 'backyard nature' (ABC n.d). Although they have yet to catch the eye of social researchers, further evidence of an emerging engagement of backyard nature is to be found in the existence of the nature-care (landcare, coastcare, etc.) groups that have spread rapidly throughout Australian suburban environments over the last fifteen years.

Alongside such emergent performances of suburban nature, there are signs that some Australian radical ecology scholars are beginning to take seriously the task of imagining what it might mean for Australians to become native to the city (Mathews 2005) and for the city to become the "locus of ecological holiness" (Rigby 2004, xii). Nonetheless, the assumption that Australian society can only begin on a transition toward 'sustainability' by first rejecting suburban ideals in favour of new forms of urbanism or ruralism remains widespread within environmental discourses. The presentation of suburban imaginaries as the high point of consumerist mindlessness and suburban natures as inherently illegitimate is a major factor in the continued polarization that attends many environmental debates. Regardless of the forms of settlement such a transition may finally produce, it can only be begun as a participatory democratic project if the suburban aspirations, in all their heterogeneity, of the present majority of the population are taken seriously. Conversely, currently obscured possibilities for ecologically credible sub/urban futures for Australian society may become visible as environmental movements explore their own suburban origins. From this starting point, Australian environmental movements will be better able to craft empathetic and creative approaches to the task of firing the imagination of suburban Australians in a shared search for more enduring, more egalitarian and more enriching performances of nature.

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