

From Subterranean to Suburban: The Landscapes of Gay Outlaw Writing

by Martin Dines

The landscapes of sexually dissident American writing have long been conceived as entirely urban. The work of John Rechy, for instance, is always situated in the nocturnal, subterranean shadows of urban public space. The seclusion of these so-called “outlaw territories,” combined with their propinquity to mainstream society, creates an environment of near-total sexual freedom, but also a site which supposedly has the potential to disturb the city’s conventional population. However, the altogether animalistic territoriality of Rechy’s outlaw landscapes suggests instead the naturalness and timelessness of outlawry and the inevitability of conflict, rather than the possibility of change. Dennis Cooper has similarly been celebrated as an “outlaw writer”, yet much of his work is located in what amounts to the most conventional American landscape conceivable: suburbia.

Repeatedly in twentieth-century American literature, the homosexual protagonist is rendered an outsider twice over. From the likes of Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* (1948) and James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) and *Another Country* (1962) to novels published in the ‘post-liberation’ period such as Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer on the Dance* (1978) and *Nights of Aruba* (1983), queers are presented as doubly marginalized. Excommunicated as morally and physically repugnant from a society organized around heterosexuality, marriage and the family, but also repulsed by what they saw as the ignoble effeminacy, promiscuity and frivolity of the gay ‘scene’, these characters typically cut isolated and psychologically crippled figures. Not until the proliferation of gay publishing in the mid-1980s and the canonization of the coming-out story as the principle narrative of gay identity were such anxious or outwardly hostile representations of homosexual life substantially contested.¹

Certain homosexual writers, however, have engaged in what Foucault terms a ‘reverse’ discourse, whereby “homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary by which it was [...] disqualified.”² John Rechy for one recuperates the stigmatized image of the isolated homosexual. Rechy’s work responds to the dual estrangement from straight and from gay society with considerable enthusiasm, celebrating the outsider status of the “sexual outlaw,” the masculine-identified urban hustler or the promiscuous nocturnal “sexhunter.” Rechy’s protagonists, from his bestselling first novel *City of Night* (1963) to the “prose documentary” *The Sexual Outlaw* (1978), operate on the fringes of mainstream society, inhabiting subterranean nighttime environments of American metropolises. Their shadowy, marginal existence is, however, a positive virtue: being removed from the quotidian concerns of the “normal” world engenders a strong sense of liberation and, in resisting the rules and the law enforcers of heterosexual society, a defiant heroism that is noticeably absent most homosexual fictions up until the 1980s.

Rechy’s relationship with gay subculture is more complicated. The pre-liberation novels *City of Night* and *Number: One* (1967) articulate a formulation of homosexuality that pre-dates the now paradigmatic binary distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality. In these 1960s novels, as hitherto in many, particularly working-class homosexual subcultures³ men were characterized not so much by their sexuality as by their gender; instead of being gay or straight men were understood as either queens or “real” men. Rechy’s masculine hustler characters, whilst homoerotically inclined, resist homosexual identification. Queerness is ascribed to their typically more feminine clients, or their occasional drag queen “girlfriends” whose “enhanced” femininity serves to reinforce both party’s normative gender identity:

the queens being technically men but no one thinks of them that way—always “she”—their “husbands” being the masculine vagrants—fleeting and often out of convenience sharing the queens’ pads—never considering theyre [sic] involved with another man (the queen), and as long as the hustler goes only with queens – and with other men only for scoring [...]—he is himself not considered “queer” —he remains, in the vocabulary of that world, “trade.”⁴

Hence the outlaw's celebrated marginality is organized on two fronts: they are removed from mainstream society because of their aberrant sexuality; and whilst it would not be accurate to say that Rechy's early hustler protagonists are entirely detached from the gay world (the very purpose of hustler bars for example was to enable queens and trade to meet), they distanced themselves from it through a strict differentiation of gender.

By the 1970s, however, the discursive and physical spaces of Rechy's sexual outlawry overlapped considerably with those of gay liberation. A markedly more radical homosexual politics than the earlier, reformist "homophile" movements crystallized in the aftermath of the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City, although more broadly its establishment owes much to the 1960s protest movements. Writing in 1971, Dennis Altman argues that gay liberation's emergence was "intimately bound up with the two great political upheavals of the sixties, the new militancy of blacks and other non-white Americans, and the agony of Vietnam" (Altman 140); John D'Emilio suggests that all the "strands" of the "Movement," including the student New Left, the counterculture, and women's liberation each "spoke in a special way to gays and lesbians."⁵ Like the various voices of radicalism of the 1970s, the aims of gay liberation were ambitious, demanding nothing less than the dismantlement of hegemonic heterosexuality. Sexual revolution necessitated first the development of a visible and dynamic homosexual constituency through consciousness-raising campaigns. The fostering of a strong public presence, through "gay pride" and the production of "positive imagery," was considered crucial in enabling gay men and women "come out," to break open the imposed self-erasure of the closet. As D'Emilio observes, the emphasis on "coming-out" served only to bolster the movement: in so doing gays and lesbians "relinquished their invisibility, made themselves vulnerable to attack;" "furthermore, once out of the closet, they could not easily fade back in. Coming out provided gay liberation with an army of permanent enlistees" (D'Emilio 236). Simultaneously, gays were called upon to organize in ways which challenged established structures of sexual morality, in particular, the nuclear family and monogamy. For, "to achieve liberation [...] will demand a new morality and a revised notion of 'human nature.'"⁶ At least until the advent of the AIDS epidemic, promiscuity, and in particular, the cruising of cityscapes, was argued by a number of gay liberationists to be constitutive of gay subculture and a more rewarding alternative to heterosexual models of social interaction. Douglas Sadownick comments that contemporary gay publications encouraged political promiscuity, their message being "the more tricks one had, the more one helped to push the revolution along;" "Casual sexual encounters no longer took place simply because men needed to conceal their identities, but because it was considered hot to separate sex from intimacy."⁷ Some of Rechy's post-Stonewall work, particularly *The Sexual Outlaw*, which charts one man's adventures over three days and three nights in the underworld of promiscuous gay sex in Los Angeles, is consumed with the revolutionary fervor of sexual liberation. However, as we shall see, because Rechy remains wedded, so to speak, to an earlier formation of homosexuality, where the outlaw is an eternal outsider attached to an "ancestral" territory, his relationship with newly emergent and more visible elements of gay subculture remains antagonistic, or is at best ambivalent.

Certainly, the attractions of Rechy's sexual outlawry are manifold: it confers a sense of anarchistic liberation on its adherents whilst at the same time providing a vision of a new kind of community. The cruising cultures depicted in Rechy's narratives are constituted not from common histories but out of momentary shared experiences, a layering of erotic epiphanies. Indeed, his outlaws are repeatedly characterised as "pastless."⁸ Rechy declares "I wanted to create characters, including the protagonist, who might be defined 'fully' —by inference — only through their sexual journeys."⁹ The corporality of the encounter, then, comprises the limits of homosexual sociality. Whilst the pastless sexual exchanges of the outlaw may seem to dissolve individuality, they do evade imposed social categorisations. In the stertorous dark, distinctions of class and education are as indistinct as they are insignificant. Outlawry also purports a more genuine mode of life; the immediacy and authenticity of cruising contrasts with the "charade" of gay bars, particularly those with dress codes, which manifest "an embarrassing veering toward male impersonation [...] a feeling created of male drag."¹⁰ Further, the outlaw's cruising provides a means of inscribing himself into an otherwise anonymous city, whilst simultaneously reanimating urban sites that have stopped functioning. For Aaron Betsky, cruising has historically enabled a conceptualisation of urban space that lies outside the bourgeois paradigm: "It makes real a space that is essentially invisible, but that acts as a 'counterspace' to the emergent transactional space of the middle-class city."¹¹ Mark W. Turner argues that street cruising "constitutes an act of mutual recognition amid the otherwise alienating effects of the anonymous crowd;"¹² these pleasurable connections, though ephemeral like Rechy's pastless encounters, are of the kind that cumulatively comprise an individual's experience of the modern city.

Potentially, Rechy's sexual outlawry offers a number of new and positive interpretations of community and urbanity. Actually though, whilst Rechy seemingly constructs a potent urban imaginary—his first novel for instance, opens with the protagonist-narrator's declaration "Later I would think of America as one vast City of Night stretching from Times Square to Hollywood Boulevard"¹³—his characterisation of these sites and others is anything but urban. Certainly, Los Angeles has long been understood as a peculiarly un-urban metropolis, whether as "a hundred suburbs in search of a city," an "autopolis" of freeways and cul-de-sacs but not crowds, or as "Thirdspace," a "postmetropolis" which defies the traditional binary epistemology of the city.¹⁴ The L.A. of *The Sexual Outlaw*, however, is frequently devoid of any of the fabric associated with human settlement, urban, suburban or otherwise. Viewed macroscopically, the city is erased under an apocalyptic frontier, with the "ocean flooding the desert"¹⁵ and enough natural calamities to put any disaster movie to shame: "Fire swallows, the earth rumbles, mudslides crush."¹⁶ For Rechy, Los Angeles, seemingly teetering on the very edge of the world, is a metaphor for human survival, but the city itself can only be articulated as a seething absence, a vast and hostile natural landscape. The drive to prove the "naturalness" of homosexuality is achieved by eliminating the very thing that marginalized it in the first place—"civilized" society; substituting urban panoramas for primordial settings helps naturalize and re-center Rechy's "sexhunters."¹⁷

Close up, cruising sites are similarly cast as natural environments, but are contained spaces as opposed to expansive ones. The domain of the sexhunting outlaw protagonist Jim is quickly established: the subterranean, dark or nocturnal interstices behind and underneath public space. The first such environment Jim visits is typical—the dim space under a pier referred to as a "dusky cavern," "a subterranean world;" upon entering, the character feels his feet sink below the surface,¹⁸ as if he is embarking on a chthonic adventure. Later Jim cruises Griffith Park, said to be "the capital of the sexual underground," "all alcoves, grottos, [...] branch-formed 'caves'" (112). These hidden interior places are constantly referred to as "exile country," "outlaw territory" throughout. Such territories form not so much a home as a *habitat*. The connotations that survival, "territory," "sexhunt" as well as the nocturnal troglodytism of the outlaws has of a feral animality, or of a tribalism (Rechy uses both 'tribal' and 'ancestral' in equal measure to describe the outlaws' hunting grounds) are entirely appropriate. The significance of this animalism or primitivism is that the outlaws are rendered as a natural aspect of the city, as an integral part of it, and as having always been there. Paradoxically then, the outlaws are characterized as individually pastless but collectively eternal; from two perspectives they are cast as standing outside of history. Whilst the timelessness of the outlaw arguably strengthens his position—having always existed there is less need to justify his presence—it does militate against envisaging change, which is an unfortunate consequence for a text that purports to be revolutionary.

When the city's built environment is described in any detail it is usually to characterize a domiciled mainstream. Always, the thinnest veil conceals outlaw activity from the attention of straight society. In a place described as "a limbo area" (80) for example, the narrator seems to relish the propinquity of the outlaw and the unassuming public:

Nearby, neat trim houses slumber cozily, unaware that for a distance of about three blocks and lasting till just before dawn, orgies will recur in their garages, yards; under stairs, unlocked patios, store entryways, open spaces between buildings, and on the street itself. (81)

The scene expresses a keen desire to occupy and subvert the environments of the ordinary city dweller, though outlaw activity only gets as far as lapping at the doors of the anthropomorphized houses. Once again, all of the sexual sites of the outlaw are interstitial: openings, or spaces that are in-between and underneath concrete matter. Only the last site is a place in and of "itself." The street, however, constitutes a different kind of territory and empowers a separate type of activism: gay liberation. The street occupations of the Stonewall riots and gay pride marches were public declarations of collective defiance and solidarity, which contrasted altogether with the nocturnal secrecy of the outlaw. Rechy cannot help but borrow from the discourse of liberation when considering the street. In one of *The Sexual Outlaw*'s documentary "voiceovers," for instance, the narrator celebrates L.A.'s Hollywood Boulevard in the argot of gay lib: "this royal street," which "we had fought dedicatedly and sometimes bitterly for," was "now more symbolically ours than any other place in the world" (177). Rechy also constantly talks of the revolutionary nature of the sexhunt, but is only able to project images of the overthrow of the oppressions of the mainstream from the platform of the street. The culmination of a final, global revolution, orgasmically erupting from all the gay-identified streets and districts—"throughout the country, throughout the world, at an appointed sun-

bright time—let it be high noon—mass orgies!” (300–1) —is an unlikely dénouement given Rechy’s own characterization of his outlaw constituency. For the sexual outlaw is emphatically neither a public nor a diurnal creature: the orgies he participates in are in close proximity to the public but always hidden from it and always conclude before dawn. Hence, Rechy’s outlawry, in its pure form, will never affect the mainstream. Indeed, tellingly, Rechy’s own account of an L.A. Pride march demonstrates how a collective and public gay movement is anathema to outlawry. Firstly, it is Rechy who watches the event and not the character Jim, who, being shown to engage in nothing but cruising activities, would presumably have spent the afternoon exploring a more verdant part of the city. Rechy notices through the crowd some “non-serious cruising” going on, acknowledging “I myself feel the revolutionary temptation. But this is not really that kind of day” (177–8). Secondly, Rechy watches—but does not join—the march: “I don’t like ‘joining’ anything” (178), he declares, which is indicative of the irreconcilability of the anarchism of outlawry and gay liberation’s requirement for political organization and affiliation.

Moreover, so strong is the necessary dedication to outlawry that any kind of change, revolutionary or otherwise, seems impossible. Rechy claims that he wants to say that the outlaw has “an untested insurrectionary power that can bring down” the straight world. But he refuses to do so because he insists that “promiscuity, like the priesthood, requires total commitment and sacrifice” (32). “Outlaw territory” is said to be the “battlefield” (28) between the outlaw and repressive law and morality. This constant confrontation *constitutes* the sexual revolution, but the outlaw’s “ancestral rage” over the violence of the Police, and other images of perpetuity, suggests stasis, not change. Indeed, Rechy is troubled by the result of change: “When the sexual revolution is won—if it is ever won—what of the fighters of that war? Doesn’t a won war end the life of the sexual revolutionary? What of the sexual outlaw? One will mourn his passing” (301).

Other intractable issues haunt the sexually promiscuous gay man: his loneliness; his narcissism, which both further render sexual outlawry problematic. At its best the sexhunt constitutes a balletic, ritualistic communion. The underworld of the outlaw is most enlivening when revealed as a profusion of illicit connections under the pier at the book’s opening. A more startling image of outlaw contact is that of Jim holding the cock of another outlaw, which is said “to feel like an extension of his own” (26). But the possibilities of communality through sexual congress are repeatedly undermined by the twin demons of narcissism and alienation. In Griffith Park, Jim fellates one outlaw whilst imaging “it is his own cock in his own throat” (127). This discomforting vision of autoeroticism echoes the scene under the pier but indicates an absence of the outlaw connections ecstatically celebrated there (“[Jim’s] mind explodes with outlaw images: men and men and men, forbidden contacts, free, time crushed, intimate forbidden strangers” (26–27)).

Jim’s narcissism has very unfortunate consequences. He rejects any individuals who do not make the first move, needing them to indicate their desire for him first, partly out of a strict code of masculinity (albeit one that is actually peculiarly passive), and partly out of a fear of rejection and the self-destroying news that that entails. Jim’s anxieties around rejection lead, tragically, to some aborted encounters: on several occasions for example, Jim meets men with his own code of sexual conduct: with neither prepared to initiate, they stand each other off, both ending up feeling “cut deeply by regret that they did not connect” (65).

Jim is also haunted by old age, and the sexhunt is punctuated by visions of abandoned skeletal old men beckoning at him. Indeed the thrill of every outlaw excursion is tempered by the threat of loneliness. Rechy attempts to articulate the sense of empowerment this isolation can bring, a “sad joy,” or a kind of freedom, a sense of being alive that feels so acute Jim “can *taste* aloneness like ashes in [his] mouth” (48), a sentiment taken straight from Jean Genet, who celebrates the “indestructible solitude” of being “outside the world.”¹⁹ More often though, this isolation leads to alienation and despair, particularly in the ‘purgatorial dawn’²⁰ that always follows the night’s outlaw activities. Rechy attributes this negativity to the figure of the saboteur, the outlaw’s pessimistic alter ego who must always be out-argued or shouted down. The saboteur represents “inherited attitudes” and “indoctrinated guilt” (286) derived from growing up in mainstream society; Rechy argues that in order to overthrow sexual oppression there must be a ‘revolution within’ as well as one on the streets. And yet Rechy appears to let the saboteur win the argument: the book finishes with Jim stranded, alone again in the purgatorial dawn, with the sounds of conventional life starting up all around him, unaffected as usual by his night-time activities. The last man Jim sees is old, a scavenger, or a road sweeper; the final few lines leave Jim amongst the detritus of a decrepit back street (“Still shirtless from the night’s hunt, Jim stares at the garage. At the crumbling walls, the peeling

boards, the discarded cans, the broken bottles, the cluttered dried weeds, the tangled barbed wire” (307)), a final vision perhaps of his barren future. Rather than compounding the revolutionary potential of the sexual outlaw, this conclusion serves only to underline his futility.

Although not without some devotees today, *The Sexual Outlaw* and the rest of Rechy’s pre-AIDS narratives have rather fallen out of fashion; Ben Gove suggests that the reason is “probably mainly due to their relentlessly portentous tone.”²¹ Along with Rechy himself, who steadfastly continues in the same vein,²² a notable contemporary exponent of outlawry is the New York writer Bruce Benderson, author of the novels *Pretending to Say No* (1990) and *User* (1994), both set in the déclassé milieu of Times Square, and the collection of essays *Towards a New Degeneracy* (1997), which critique the alleged embourgeoisization of gay writing and culture. Today, however, queer outlawry appears to be a threatened discourse, not only as a result of the cataclysm of AIDS and the concomitant turning away from promiscuity, but also because the habitat on which the outlaw is dependent appears seriously threatened. Benderson has adopted as his constituency the denizens of Times Square, its notorious underclass of sexworkers, drug users and gender non-conformists (apparently, all of the inhabitants knew him as “‘the guy who writes those books about us’ though few had read them”). In his essay “Losing Times Square,” however, Benderson bemoans the loss of this beloved territory to an encroaching anodyne and commercialized suburbianity:

As I wallow in my waning degenerate center-city paradise, I reflect on the ways that the terrain of the Other is shrinking in America. To me, suburban America seems omnipresent.²³

Sentimental nonauthenticity [sic], which is the genius of suburbia, has taken the lead in Times Square. It is epitomized by the new establishments’ use of vacuum-molded plastic and steel facsimiles or art deco trim, which serves as a cynical tip of the hat to Times Square’s architectural past. What used to be sordid is being replaced by pseudo.

Benderson refers here to the effects of new zoning laws introduced in 1996 which prohibited sex-related businesses from the area and enabled the development of large-scale commercial establishments. The close involvement of Disney with Times Square’s gentrification (along with a sizeable amount of its own money the corporation was lent millions of dollars by the city and state to “renovate” the area) has in particular fueled criticism that the area has been converted into a sanitized urban theme park.²⁴ Benderson is not the only gay writer to lament the loss to suburban safety and family values of an environment which has historically facilitated contact between different races and classes: Samuel R. Delaney makes a similar case in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999).

Actually though, for Benderson Times Square has always thrived on suburban interlopers. Partly as a consequence of its function as a transport hub, the site is a culturally “tense node” where different classes and racial groups interact, or at least come into one another’s view in their shared quest for entertainment and pleasure. In particular, it is a place where one may “see cars from suburban New Jersey barreling to the curb to pick up drugs being sold by somebody from the ghetto of East New York [and] catch glimpses of [...] businessmen from Connecticut stiffly walking a female or transvestite prostitute to a pay-by-the-hour hotel.” These visits, though hurried, provide Times Square the critical function of reminding mainstream America that the nation has an unseemly underside. Benderson’s evocation of a seedy after-hours underworld has echoes of Rechy’s description of the area written over three decades previous in *City of Night*, where cruising spaces “form the boiling subterranean world of Times Square”²⁵ (Rechy’s repeated “dungeon” metaphors transform into a proliferation of SM dungeons in Benderson’s account). While similarly subterranean, the two versions differ: Benderson’s disenfranchised people are, indeed must be, visible or accessible to the rest of society; Rechy’s by contrast are, like in the rest of his outlaw writing, always hidden, the “nightly shadows [that] cling to the ledges.”²⁶ Like Rechy though, Benderson believes that it is only from outside the strictures of conventional society that vision and freedom are possible. The “suburbanization” of Times Square, as Benderson has it, entails the total gutting of an authentic and enlivening underground and its replacement with an assortment of ersatz surfaces.

Undeniably, AIDS too has had a devastating impact upon urban homosexual subcultures. Aaron Betsky envisages a process similar to that observed in dismay by Benderson but one which follows an opposite course. Rather than urban cultures being swamped by suburban development, Betsky sees queers evacuating the city centres for the

suburbs:

Queer space is, in fact, in danger of disappearing. AIDS destroyed the queer community as a coherent structure, and queers disappeared into their homes, the suburbs, and anonymity. [...] Now queers often want to be normal. They adopt children, dress like their neighbors, and even disavow the presence of a communal culture.²⁷

The bitterness over the loss of homosexual urban territories to a bland or superficial suburbia is unsurprising: it is the distaste of an American literary and cultural elite that has prevailed for much of the twentieth century. Other queer writers, however, have sought to harness the potential of suburban space. L.A.-based writer Dennis Cooper's novel *Try*, follows the exploits of Ziggy McCauley, a teenager living in San Gabriel Valley suburbia who is struggling not only with his confusing sexuality and his love for his increasingly vulnerable heroin-addicted best friend Calhoun, but also with his two gay fathers, who adopted Ziggy in a "stab at heterosexual bliss," an "experiment"²⁸ that seems to have gone badly wrong and broken down into repeated bouts of violent sexual abuse. *Try* features all of the things Betsky complains about: individuals disappearing into anonymity; gays adopting children; people dressing like their neighbours; further, Cooper himself has repeatedly disavowed "the presence of a communal culture." These characteristics, however, achieve precisely the opposite of normalcy; instead they engender anarchistic autonomy. Ultimately, it is Cooper's suburban landscapes as opposed to Rechy's subterranean city—or, more generally, surface rather than depth—that better facilitates sexual and creative freedom.

Betsky is at least aware that other gay writers have reckoned with and created visions of suburban environments. But his synopsis that "to queer authors like Dennis Cooper [the desire for underage boys] laid bare the rootlessness and moral boundlessness of suburbia in an extremely violent and spatial manner"²⁹ is only partially correct. As we shall see, Cooper amply demonstrates the "boundlessness," moral and otherwise, of suburbia, yet there is a misplaced negativity in Betsky's assertion, which no doubt derives from the emphasis on the borderline paedophilia of Cooper's novels. Betsky describes the emergence of a new kind of non-physical space, imposed on queers after the mass-destruction inflicted by AIDS: "the void," an emptiness characterised by "that absence, that loss" (182). Through a collective experience of this absence, the void has become "the queerest space of all," subsequently, queers have learnt how to "build an identity that would then be separate from real spaces of connection and community" (179), most notably, Betsky states, through the Internet. Whilst AIDS is hardly on the radar in any of Cooper's books, hence not the motor for suburbanisation that it is for Betsky, it seems strange that Betsky cannot connect conceptually the emptiness and boundlessness of the void with that of suburbia. Indeed, by his own account the two domains are synonymous: it is surely only the resilience of the hostile and narrow discourse on suburbia that prevents him from seeing that, on his own terms, suburbia is "the queerest space of all."

Cooper's avowed anarchism does potentially align him with Rechy. Certainly, Cooper has frequently been characterized as an outlaw writer; indeed, Bret Easton Ellis's oxymoronic epithet, that he is "the last literary outlaw in mainstream fiction" is currently being used to sell Cooper's books. Ellis's term "literary outlaw" may well describe Cooper's pre-occupation with violence and seemingly "extreme" forms of sexuality, but Cooper's fiction does not celebrate the outlaw figure in the same manner as Rechy's. Whilst many of Cooper's suburban protagonists have similar habits to the junkies and hustlers of Times Square, there is no glorification of some perpetual battle between sexually dissident subcultures and the mainstream. Neither do Cooper's suburb-located novels represent an attempt to attack or infiltrate the mainstream. For Cooper, the perceived emptiness of suburban landscapes is emphatically an advantage; their blandness, their blankness renders them perfect hiding places from oppressively conformist narratives of selfhood. Cooper's suburbs constitute a *deteritorialization*, an attempt to create a non-defining space free from mainstream, or indeed gay, hegemonic identities.

Cooper acknowledges that the predominantly suburban geography of Los Angeles, the city in which he lives and writes, influences his work, and agrees that it can be read "as a place where received social structures are at their loosest and least defining." Yet, precisely because it fosters "the closest Western culture comes to privatized experience," Cooper finds the city does not impose itself on his work: "You can write about L.A. and not describe it." Significantly, the private rhythms of L.A., its secrecy, afford writers tremendous freedoms; Cooper argues that these qualities enable him to achieve "purity" in his work.³⁰

The suburbs, however, do not only connote blankness; indeed, sometimes it seems suburbia's signification is

over-determined—the environment is typically deployed to represent mainstream America. Recently there has been a proliferation of films and fiction that explore suburbia in order to examine America's dark heart, particularly after the Columbine high school shootings.³¹ Cooper's recent novel *My Loose Thread* (2002) is a response to the high school shootings, but as with the rest of his oeuvre, does not aim to be a commentary on the state of the nation. The book avoids all causal explanations for the shootings, e.g. social alienation, or a culture of violence, presumably as too simplistic. Rather than dissecting his youthful characters, their backgrounds and psychological constitutions, the novel focuses on the confusion of the perpetrators. *My Loose Thread* is an attempt to create a participatory experience, where the manner of the narrative is in thrall to its characters: when the protagonist is confused or violent, for example, the narrative becomes so.

Try, which is set in the San Gabriel Valley north of Los Angeles, constitutes a more sustained examination of suburban blankness. Cooper shares with *Try*'s protagonist a San Gabriel upbringing, but his selection of this suburban area for the novel's location over the far more notorious ones that lie adjacent is also fitting. The reputations of the San Fernando Valley to the west and the swathes of Orange County suburbia to the southeast have spread nationally and beyond. The former in particular, referred to simply as "The Valley," has become a national metonym, serving as America's "favorite symbol of suburbia run rampant." This role is undoubtedly aided by the Valley's location as Hollywood's backyard, its streets and buildings being utilized as a backdrop for innumerate television programs and films. The Valley's on-screen ubiquity explains why many who visit it physically for the first time find that "they already know the landscape, consciously or not."³² San Gabriel's relatively low profile helps Cooper somewhat to disengage from the discourse of nation that currently pervades suburb-located film and fiction. Its comparative obscurity renders San Gabriel more private, less likely to foster preconceptions. On the other hand, the total anonymity of some suburban settings is maintained precisely in order to present their texts as geographically non-specific, thereby enabling them to be characterized as generically American. The film *American Beauty* is a case in point; as its title suggests, the film attempts to be locally and regionally transcendent: its nameless iterative residential blocks scanned from an aerial scrolling camera are understandable as the adjunctive landscape of any US city; its protagonist, facing an all-too-ordinary midlife crisis, an everyman. The settings of Cooper's novels, even if unnamed, are locatable through regional references and a recognizably south Californian demotic. Angelean suburbia may represent the epitome of a profoundly privatized mode of American life, but by avoiding the more nationally infamous locales, Cooper evades questions of American identity by utilizing this privacy: *Try* escapes into the very suburban blankness that is derided in other texts.

The blanket suburbanity of *Try* resists two conventional kinds of narratives: the dissection of suburban life as a means of diagnosing national ills, as discussed above, and the standard narrative of gay youth, the coming-out story, whereby the teenager evacuates the familial (and homophobic) suburb for the city in order to attain gay identity. Also, generally, the traditional escape route for maligned, abused or just bored teens is to the city (though recent studies have explored contemporary concerns about the apparently deleterious effects of bands of alienated and antisocial youth in suburbia—though usually not from the perspective of the disaffected teenager.³³ Ziggy, however, avowedly refuses this well-trodden path; his journeys that criss-cross his own and other neighbourhoods never see him emerge from suburbia. Only Roger, one of Ziggy's adoptive fathers, has secured himself a metropolitan base, and it is to central New York that Roger wishes to transport Ziggy as lover after having dissolved their familial bond and abandoning their suburban location: Ziggy's "transference East" requires him to "accept the new post of 'lover,' keep mum re: our past, thereby legitimizing our love in such a way as to avoid explanations that would inevitably be awkward, even among chums." Yet Ziggy scuppers his father's designs, by not only successfully demanding that Roger fly out West to see him, but refusing to return with him after he has arrived. For Roger though, the suburban environment that constitutes most of Los Angeles is in itself an alluring prospect that makes the journey worthwhile: as he approaches the city, he realizes with irritation that "L.A. was smogged over that morning, so I was denied the adrenaline rush of floating onto its endless and bleached teenage-boy-peppered grid."³⁴ This incident serves rather as a rebuff to the scrolling "God-shot" of suburban tracts enjoyed by the viewer, who is positioned as a superior outsider, as in *American Beauty*. Here the Angelean landscape successfully hides its teenage inhabitants from the all-seeing eyes of a metropolitan predator.

The bleak Angelean suburbs provide the entire narrative terrain for *Try* because they constitute the natural habitat of teenagers like Ziggy, or "human beings at their most fiercely alive, most ... evolved" (19) At the same time,

suburbia is no anarchistic paradise: the lives of Cooper's youths are heavily circumscribed by the whims, obsessions and oppressive narratives of adults—parents, predatory older men, teachers and psychologists. So the suburbs become battlegrounds; as Rechy's men are locked in struggle in 'outlaw territory' with the Police and mainstream society, Cooper's suburbs become sites of contestation between the generations. For example, Ziggy constantly parrots the restrictive, pessimistic and probably false diagnoses of his school therapist: that he is manic depressive for instance; and repeatedly, that he is needy and insecure because of his history of sexual abuse (184, 195). Elsewhere, the lessons of psychoanalysis are said to be "ingrained" and "Big-Brotherish" (123). More sinisterly, the very spaces and structures of suburbia seem sometimes to be infiltrated by a listening presence, an oppressive adult surveillance. At one point, Ziggy can hear the inside of a house, "a kind of textured silence, like that 'music' his therapist plays in their background" (7). Even the voids of suburbia, seemingly the kinds of spaces which possess most libratory potential, are liable to be contested.

Suburbs inevitably also house families. The closest *Try* gets to presenting a model of the traditional heterosexual family, however, is through background noise of sit-coms and game shows from the TV; the sound of *Married ... with Children* re-runs is said to be "the stupidest sound in the world."³⁵ Otherwise there is only Ziggy's two fathers' failed experiment at building a nuclear family. The ostensible reason for their failure is unremarkable: one parent could not stand the domestic set up. Ziggy is left in the hands of his crasser and more violent father, Brice, who apparently starts sexually abusing him from the age of eight years old. Both familial situations are castigated, not simply because they may entail violence, but rather for the reason that they are predicated on inherited, *unexamined* narratives of human interaction. Roger, Ziggy's much more sophisticated if obsessive father provides commentary on both kinds: "The family unit," he says, "is an inherently fascist and oddball construction – private, sacred, untrespassable, nobody's business except those involved."³⁶ Meanwhile, intrigued by his ex-partner's predilection for Old West-themed furnishings, memorabilia and pulp-fiction, whose house has become a sort of Wild West "theme-park-in-a-tract-house," Roger realizes that Brice believes he has "unearthed an official, historical grounding of sorts for his lack of morality" which means that "safe in his dim re-creation of a lawless utopia, Brice could lord his foul moods over Ziggy et al" (122–23). Once again, it is not so much Brice's brutality that Roger is critical of (and fascinated by), but his utilization of inauthentic narratives—his Wild West décor is after all already transposed and "romanticized and muted" (121) via the myth-making machine of Hollywood.

Few kinds of narrative in *Try* escape censure. Those that do manage to open up space rather than misrepresent, for example, Ziggy's beloved band Hüsker Dü: regarding a poster of the band members, Ziggy decides

something about those three older guys' eyes, and the misery they housed, did this great corrective thing to the world. It seemed roomier or something. More ... uncharted. They knew a spot. Somewhere realistically bizarre, not just overly imagined on drugs then transcribed in corny outer-space colors, like in the posters that spaced out most kids he'd grown up with (175–76).

Ziggy is himself ironically encumbered with a name that invokes one of the greatest icons of suburban escapism, Bowie's Ziggy Stardust. But as he says himself, Ziggy does not wish to leave for some Day-Glo fantasy realm (and neither, once again, is the teenager intrigued by the kind of metropolitan allure that Bowie's later, terrestrial incarnations radiated). Rather, Ziggy seeks places and modes of expression that are authentic and meaningful. Cooper's blank suburbs provide a space from where the likes of Ziggy are able to follow his own projects.

Ziggy's ideal location is not itself pure escapism. For Cooper, the powers of transformation accorded to the likes of Hüsker Dü, as well as the blankness of suburbia, are valued precisely because they suggest a sense of the ineffable—or to use Ziggy's word, the "uncharted," conferring liberation from prescribed ways of seeing. In any case, Cooper's suburban scenes are not idealised, as Ziggy's often violent confrontations with his parents testify; nor do they exhibit an absence of social interaction or complexity. Indeed Cooper depicts subtleties of differences based on wealth, though it seems Ziggy's richer acquaintances are equally eager to conceal themselves in a suffusion of blandness. For example, touring his friend Nicole's belongings, Ziggy notices most of her clothes "seem too nondescript and conventionally trendy for someone so sharp. Still, Ziggy's used to how wealthy people surround themselves with stuff that's simplistic or dull on the eyes, ears, nose, etc [...] It's like, Hey world, I'm rich, leave me fucking alone!" (51)

Also, in contrast to Rechy's outlaws, who stand outside modernity, Cooper's Angelean suburbs are historically

locatable. Their expansive emptiness which derives from a seemingly relative under-population and absence of social cohesion characterizes these environments as being in the early stages of their suburban development. As Yi-Fu Tuan has described, the rough beginnings of un-planned suburbs in the United States commonly constitute a new frontier:

The suburb is at the frontier of metropolitan expansion. It is a society coming into being, a society undergoing change, at the end of which is urban culture. Pioneering characteristics of the new suburbs are revealed in its lack of form, lack of socially differentiated structure, and in the general rawness of its living conditions: muddy streets, undependable water, primitive sewerage and garbage disposal, poor or non-existent schools, poor transportation and the sense of isolation. A pioneering sense of doing things oneself is necessary when a family moves into a low-income subdivision, created—almost overnight—in the countryside.³⁷

Typically, Tuan argues, the developmental model of suburbs is equivalent to a process of urbanization. Gradually, they acquire many of the public, commercial and cultural amenities associated with the urban centre, though by which time it is likely that further new and more peripheral suburban developments have expanded beyond the urbanized suburb, with correspondingly baser living conditions. Ziggy's far-flung neighborhood is manifestly of this early-stage suburban type, exhibiting some of the frontier roughness as suggested by Tuan: Roger casts a derisive eye over the "scrubby, arid San Gabriel Valley, whose flat neighborhoods were inexpensive enough for my brainless, job-flitting, asshole ex-boyfriend," whose property amounts to "a brief, pothole-dotted driveway [which] led to a standard garage [next to a] nondescript, fifties-style tract house."³⁸ It is actually not altogether clear how new this suburb is: "fifties-style" suggests yet another pseudo-historic architectural motif to add the already thoroughly post-modern mix that is Angelean suburbia which offers a "choice of nuevo-kitsch" styles, e.g. "Tudor, Château, Camelot, Miami Vice."³⁹ "Fifties-style," however, amounts to a peculiarly self-reflexive one (a tract house in the style of a tract house?). The "huge" tree in Brice's garden, though, suggests that the "style" was a slip of the pen on Cooper's part and that Brice's neighbourhood is in fact several decades old. One of the things characteristic of "fresh" suburbs, Tuan notes, are the doomed, "straggly" saplings that die off through neglect or vandalism.⁴⁰ Though if it is the case that Ziggy's home environment was built in the fifties, it seems that, contrarily, the only thing that has developed is that single tree; the increased urbanity predicted by Tuan has entirely passed the neighborhood by. The potholes, then, might as well have been a result of an absence of development, rather than, what is likely to have been the case, a lack of maintenance.

That the suburban environment of *Try* still feels frontier-like forty years on is significant. The newly-built suburb requires initiative and fosters autonomy or, to use Tuan's words again, "a pioneering sense of doing things oneself is necessary." Indeed, new suburbs had this attraction in their favor; they offered freedom from many of the restrictions of urban living. *Contra* the commonplace supercilious denigration of enhancements made by many of the new suburbanites to their properties, Tuan insists "to the residents themselves the changes were not tacky; rather they expressed that freedom to innovate which was denied them in the city."⁴¹ For Ziggy, this "freedom to innovate" is of paramount importance. A second-generation teenaged suburbanite, Ziggy's interests lie naturally not with conservatory extensions and amateur topiary, but to things closer to his own experience. His projects are concerned with sexual and artistic exploration, for example, his zine (i.e., home-produced magazine), "I Apologize," dedicated to the sexually abused and, once again, his apprehensive fascination with sex with other men. To be clear, all of Ziggy's creative exploits are suburb-located: his zine production is a home- and school-based industry, and all of his sexual adventures take place within his own and his friends' parental houses. Escape to the city and the supposed freedoms that dance on the metropolitan horizon have no caché for the teenager; the imagined expansiveness of the suburb-as-frontier goes a long way to counter the restrictions of Ziggy's family relationships. The frontier is largely featureless, itself extending into nothingness or, like the city grid that Roger imagines from high above, replicates emptiness into infinitude. Both the vastness and the void-ness of the suburban frontier allow the likes of Ziggy to imagine and even to enact infinite performances and transformations.

However, it is very much to the point that these altered states lay beyond the text: description equates with prescription; if Cooper were to outline Ziggy's potentialities it would be to delimit them. As Calhoun suggests, "Things don't have to be cordoned off in pockets, drawers, towns, neighborhoods, etc., to function. There's the possibility of genius in chaos, in having to fumble around, knowing whatever you need isn't all that well hidden a half-foot in any direction."⁴² Calhoun comes to this realisation whilst rummaging for injecting equipment, but this

does not diminish the fact that he has recapitulated the narrative's conviction in existence in unbounded space, an existence which is at the same time always undisclosed and imperceptible. Also, Cooper uses a number of textual devices to ensure that Ziggy's transformations stay extra-textual. For example, the novel's narrative is fractured, staying with each character for only brief periods; its narrative voice continually speaks in Ziggy's ever-cautious demotic. The vacillations and hedges such as "like," "or whatever" and "whatchacallit"⁴³ all serve the purpose of leaving Ziggy's environment and psychological state uncertain, undetermined, whilst remaining faithful to his youthful perspective.

The novels of Dennis Cooper have been described as the product of a "literary outlaw." But whilst *Try* shares with *The Sexual Outlaw* a desire to evade or overcome oppression, and to locate a space in which one may be free and authentic, it neither deifies the figure who achieves this, nor sanctifies the place in which it occurs. To do so along the lines of Rechy's urban outlawry merely undermines liberty by reimposing new narrative strictures. If the outlaw is circumscribed by the space he inhabits and by his opposition to the mainstream, Cooper's sketching of a blank and expansive type of suburban environment represents a non-defining space. Further, unlike *The Sexual Outlaw's* eternal denizens of the dark city, the characters of *Try* are connected to a history of outer-suburban development: Cooper's novel turns its back on the metropolis and helps imagine new futures.

Notes

- 1 See Robert McRuer, *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).
- 2 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 1* (London: Penguin, 1998), 101.
- 3 George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 65–98.
- 4 John Rechy, *Numbers* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 105.
- 5 John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), 224.
- 6 Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfray, 1971), 58.
- 7 Qtd. in Ben Gove, *Cruising Culture: Promiscuity, Desire and American Gay Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 27.
- 8 E.g., John Rechy, *Rushes* (New York: Grove Press, 1979), 23; and John Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 16.
- 9 Rechy, *Rushes*, 16.
- 10 Rechy, *Rushes*, 238.
- 11 Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: Morrow, 1997), 142.
- 12 Mark W. Turner, *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* (London: Reaktion, 2003), 9.
- 13 John Rechy, *City of Night* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 11.
- 14 Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).
- 15 Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw*, 36.
- 16 Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw*, 37.
- 17 Rechy's later novels do render Los Angeles more concretely. *Bodies and Souls* (2001) declares L.A. "the most physical and spiritual of cities;" Rechy adds, perhaps unoriginally, "the fact that Los Angeles is a city without a center encourages restless individuality"; John Rechy, *Bodies and Souls* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), x. The figure of the outlaw, however, has largely disappeared.
- 18 Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw*, 24.

- 19 Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal* (London: Penguin, 1967), 123.
 - 20 Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw*, 81.
 - 21 Gove, *Cruising Culture*, 42.
 - 22 See Rechy, "Outlaw Sensibility in the Arts," 1999.
 - 23 Bruce Benderson, "Losing Times Square," 2004, http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/features/benderson/benderson9-9-96.asp (accessed October 10, 2004).
 - 24 See Boyer, "Twice-Told Stories: The Double Erasure of Times Square" 1999.
 - 25 Rechy, *City of Night*, 35.
 - 26 Rechy, *City of Night*, 34.
 - 27 Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: Morrow, 1997), 192 .
 - 28 Dennis Cooper, *Try* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 12.
 - 29 Betsky, *Queer Space*, 192.
 - 30 Richard Canning, *Gay Fiction Speaks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) 323–24.
 - 31 *Elephant* (USA, 2003), written and directed by Gus Van Sant, which depicts a high school massacre, is explicitly inspired by the Columbine tragedy. Other recent films such as *Donnie Darko* (USA, 2001), written and directed by Richard Kelly, and *The Virgin Suicides* (USA 1999), directed by Sophie Coppola and based on Jeffrey Eugenides's novel of the same name, are both centred on the high schools of calm, contented suburban communities which conceal sinister psycho-sexual undercurrents.
 - 32 Kevin Roderick, *The San Fernando Valley: America's Suburb* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Times Press, 2001), ii.
 - 33 See Wooden and Blaczak, *Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws* 1994 and Korem, *Suburban Gangs* 1995.
 - 34 Cooper, *Try*, 100.
 - 35 *Married ... with Children* represents one of several sitcoms of the eighties and nineties that attempted to 'parody the now-classic suburban sitcoms of the 1950s only to recreate in detail for new audiences the very conventions of suburban life they ostensibly subvert; William Sharpe and Leonard Wollock, "Bold New City or Built-up Burb? Redefining Contemporary Suburbia." *American Quarterly* 46, no. 1: 180.
 - 36 Cooper, *Try*, 182.
 - 37 Yi-Fi Tuan, *Topophilia* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prenticehall, 1974), 238.
 - 38 Cooper, *Try*, 101.
 - 39 James Robert Baker, *Tim and Pete*, (Manchester: Ringpull, 1995), 174.
 - 40 Tuan, *Topophilia*, 234.
 - 41 Tuan, *Topophilia*, 235.
 - 42 Cooper, *Try*, 66.
 - 43 See, e.g., Cooper, *Try*, 142–43.
-

Martin Dines received a PhD (English Literature) in 2006 for his thesis entitled *Homecoming Queens: Gay Suburban Narratives in British and American Film and Fiction*, from Kingston University, London, where he currently lectures in Media and Cultural Studies.