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## Conclusion: Same As it Ever Was?

*It's so bloody nice. . . . Felicity treacle Kendal and Richard sugar-flavoured snot Briers . . . they're nothing but a couple of reactionary stenotypes confirming a myth that everyone in Britain is a loveable middle-class eccentric and I hate them.*

(Vyvian from the *Young Ones* on *The Good Life*, quoted in Bowes 1990:131)

This book has attempted to look at the framing and representation of suburbia by popular cultural texts including literary, onscreen and aural forms in order to draw some conclusions about suburbs from the multiplicity of depictions discussed. If suburbia has been the subject under the microscope then popular culture is the lens through which it has been viewed. Mass popular culture after all can be a catalyst for cultural incorporation and given that suburbia is a concept that eludes easy definition, its reproduction in popular culture has helped to shape the concept in the popular imagination. Uniting all of the phenomena discussed is an ostensible desire to entertain the masses. The book has attempted to come up to date from the imagery of the Gray Flannel Suit and Pooter. A fuller account than space allows for here would consider other cultural forms or broader structural factors of socio-political change in suburbia but for now it can be said that the popular cultures discussed need to be located in context (i) alongside other competing media and culture, for example news reporting which commands sometime separate and sometimes overlapping audiences and (ii) against the backdrop of wider societal trends. Some of the cultural forms dealt with have distinctive conventions of genre and common plot devices (e.g. the sitcom) whereas others less obviously have categorical logics to them (e.g. popular music which covers sonically different styles, e.g. grime and Britpop). Literalness is not the primary aim of the portrayals that have been discussed here; dramatization in music, novels and onscreen representations of suburbia

are as much about fantasy and escapism as they are to inform and practice social realism. They reflect suburban life as well as shaping it. Academics may dissect their narrative rhetoric but behind their messages and meanings most of what the Kinks, Orwell, Mike Leigh, the drama writers and all their peers that have appeared in the previous chapters have done is fundamentally the age-old art of storytelling, informing our understandings of suburbia along the way. In this way with their competing stories they have all contributed to the ambiguity of this somewhat liminal space of inbetween-ness: is it prison or promised land?

In some ways then the story of this book has been about erosion of the boundary between the categories of 'urban' and 'suburban' and the way that what we consider to be a suburb changes over time as have popular cultural forms. Pooter's suburban Holloway, now distinctly inner city, serves as a classic example. Light (1991:54) describes how 'late Victorian villadom so hated in its day [was] celebrated fifty years on by a new insecure middle class who were too busy attacking another generation of suburbanites to see the irony'. Her comment recalls Betjeman but the cycle often repeats, for example anti-suburban prejudice was a motivation behind the actions of the inner-city gentrifiers of the 1980s who moved to what were Victorian suburbs (Islington, Peckham, etc.) and whose own parents had raised them in interwar-built suburbia. She lists the Edwardian writer Ivy Compton-Burnett's list of examples of the vulgarity of the masses . . . 'the "coloured", the "youth", but also cinema-goers, thriller readers, those who live in the suburbs like Hampstead, buy shop flowers or shop cakes, or put milk in the cup first' (Light 1991:57). This all sounds quaintly anachronistic given recent history when difficulties that have faced London suburbs include riots (Ealing and Croydon, see Huq 2013) or UK-wide the decline of the high street in the face of online transactions, out of town shopping and recession. Since the trend towards the suburban novel began with the daily life chronicles of Pooter in *Punch* columns we have come a long way via Orwell's critical reflections, Delderfield's historical sweep of documentary through to post-apocalyptic science fiction and new Asian writing examples of which were looked at in Chapter 7 all of which have sustained the suburban tendency in fiction. The book itself has changed in form to a digital product accessed on an e-reader just as the physical product of music has been overtaken by digital downloads. The thirst for celebrity is seen now that both popstars and authors alike can be followed on twitter and with big book festivals (Haye on Wye, etc.) and big money prizes (The Booker, The Orange) as a result of which contemporary writers are not reclusive, cloistered individuals anymore. The form of the book has shrunk from clunky hardback to portable paperback and now the discreet, lightweight e-reader. When the erotic bondage themed novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* by a first-time author E. L. James (2011) revealed in

disdainful tones to be a suburban mother of two it seemed appropriate that the book (followed by two subsequent titles making up a trilogy) became the first title ever to shift more copies in digital download rather than as hard copy as it could be read during a commute to and from the suburbs (where most people do their reading) without fellow passengers knowing what was being read.

Politically and demographically there is far greater diversity at work in suburbia than detractors would acknowledge. It is far more than a territory of 'conformist squadrons of Barratt estates told apart only by the cars on the drives' (Dean 2009). There are multiple suburbias which have all experienced continuity and change: Victorian and Edwardian areas of well-appointed detached villas in wide streets for the carriage classes, railway workers cottages, Edwardian terraces built for commuting clerks, planned 1930s semi-detacheds laid out on a grid-plan and postwar new-builds, residential settlements bordering industrial estates to name but a few types in Britain. Tenure varies too: the building societies helped home ownership explode but the financial downturn has helped expose the dangers of building economic strategy on an asset bubble. Meanwhile proto municipal garden suburbs were realized in council cottage estates rented on assured tenancies from local government; although the supply of social housing dried up after Thatcher whose policy of 'right to buy' sold these away from local authority control. In the United States there are the villas of the well-to-do as seen in the sets of television shows such as *Desperate Housewives* or more recently *Suburgatory* wrapped round with white picket fences yet there are also Levittowns, aluminium-sided cracker-box homes and even the dwellings of 'trailer trash'. There are differing cultures of suburbia in all of these as well as common constraints felt in all of them.

Representations feed into one another. Many of the cultural products referred to take more than one form sometimes spanning book, film, television series with accompanying theme song/hit record for example. The 1956 film *Man in the Grey Flannel suit* was repackaged for its 2011 DVD release with graphics similar to that of opening titles and DVD boxed sets of the popular drama serial *Mad Men* picturing a monochromatic suited city gent in a wide-brimmed hat. Representations similarly never take place in a vacuum. Industrial strife hit both *People Like Us* an ITV series based on Delderfield's Avenue books and Leslie Thomas's *Tropic of Ruislip* adapted for television as *Tropic* from ATV, which were never fully screened due to the disruption of the ITV strike of 1979. In Summer 2012 a dispute between the voiceover artists and Fox News also put the *Simpsons* continuation in peril. In answering the question set at the beginning, 'is there a separate category of "suburban"?' popular culture it is probably safest to say that the term 'suburban' conceals a multiplicity of experiences meaning that if used as a category marker

it runs the risk of oversimplifying social processes and over-determining by geography when structuring structures like social class, educational attainment ethnicity and gender are also predictors of life chances and cultures of the suburbs. Suburban representations have changed over time. Any depictions of any social phenomena are relational and context-specific and must be read in the light of broader socio-economic circumstances. Oil and house prices have underpinned the Western economy since at least the latter part of the twentieth century (Long 2011). Notwithstanding this, even factoring in economic downturn, the cost of the homes and cars we associate with the suburban lifestyle, has made this ideal more distant for many: more of a struggle for some and out of reach for others. Technology is also a driver of audience participation.

The rewinding of archival history through YouTube, Amazon, on-demand television catch-up services and any number of other mediums makes those circumstances and accompanying global context less straightforward than ever before, reflecting the complexity of contemporary suburbia which requires multiple understandings and mappings. J. R. Hartley would not have to trawl through the shops for *Flyfishing* anymore as in the old Yellow Pages television advertisement. The book could be found in a few clicks of a mouse. The art of accessing cultural products by smart phones and other handheld devices now feels more like leisure than 'computing', particularly as the action is now conducted via svelte, highly portable objects of desire not fixed components of the workspace. In allowing users to comment websites and blogs also become sounding board as well as technological means of view: opening up debate making them platforms in the widest sense. Audiences are affected by the music they listen to, books that they read and television and film that they watch but Frankfurt school-style models of the public as an undifferentiated mass or as vessels to be filled with the messages of popular culture ignore that the public may have very different, wildly divergent predispositions to begin with. The reception of active audiences is easy to overlook in rushing to solemnly declare that popular culture's relationship of suburban social norms is both to reflect (holding up a mirror to them) or reinforce them (acting more like a screwdriver). Cultural pessimists would argue that broadcasting, the literary arena, film and music industries have bowed to commercialism by privileging entertainment over information, popularity over quality and emotional appeal over reason in the age-old dumbing down debate but we have a situation of a shifting relationship between the production of cultural texts and their production in complex inter-related processes. New formats demand new research methodologies and theoretical paradigms. Technologies change but often core questions remain: you can just as easily dissect music listened to on ipods in a search for meaning

as you could with that on gramophone records, the same goes for books read via modern e-readers.

Is there a descriptor of 'suburban' that we can apply to describe specifically suburban popular culture wedded to a set of values designed to embody a suburban aesthetic and appeal to a particularly suburban public? The answer is that if there is, it is constantly in flux. Different depictions represent different versions of suburbia: if you take Ballard's (2006) *Kingdom Come* Brooklands emerges as an unremittingly bleak dystopian wasteland lacking spiritual or moral backbone where cut-throat consumer culture has triumphed. However earlier portrayals saw the suburbs as a veritable utopia. Suburbia is complex construction, it is more than a place on a map. It is a territory that, despite being portrayed as stifling straitjacket is flexible: constantly changing and displaying a seemingly limitless capacity to adapt to circumstances. Suburbia, as we have seen, can be socially constructed, literally constructed and culturally constructed. Popular culture's ever multiplying forms and varied versions of suburbia capture the transformations undergone by wider society. This can be heard in the music which has soundtracked suburbia, read on the page and seen on the large and small screens where suburbia has been reflected and refracted. The suburbs were conceived in optimism. When talking of the UK social housing variety envisaged as 'homes fit for heroes' for returning ex-servicemen, Bayliss (2002:376) for example describes 'low density, quasi rural estates complete with winding lanes, cottages, gardens, trees and greens'. Arguably some of these council cottage estates have not fared well and are exhibiting distinct signs of wear and tear around their centenary period. Alongside ideas of 'white flight' we can also now talk of 'brown flight' (for suburbanising black and Asian people) or perhaps even 'yellow flight' (to describe eg the South Korean Asians of New Malden), Huq (2013).

Suburbia has become a popular idiom for multiple cultural products from pop videos to lengthy novels and other forms that this book has not gone into such as advertising where the suburbs are often seen in print and onscreen, for example as home to the Oxo family whose round-the-dinner table talk appeared in the spaces in between programmes to British television viewers for generations. The resulting body of work offers us a view of suburbia from multiple perspectives and it can be concluded from it that, without us realizing it, suburbia has become a potent cultural signifier as seen in the title of the Grammy 2011 album of the year *The Suburbs*, a surprise win awarded to a long player from Canada's Arcade Fire.

The book has attempted to look at examples where the suburbs shape the end product rather than being the incidental backdrop as could be argued was the case with, for example the films *Donnie Darko* (a teenage misfit in a peripheral neighbourhood) and *Shaun of the Dead* (zombies rampage around mock-Tudor

streets). Suburban values, themselves in a state of continual renewal and modification, are then often to be inferred rather than directly stated sometimes from cautionary tales of life on the perimeter. Even cartoons which are *prima facie* aimed at children have depicted the social structures of the suburbs with recent examples openly critical of the 'them' and 'us' binary logics that the privatized world of suburbia can connote. The 2011 CGI (computer-generated image) feature film *Gnomio and Juliet* put a suburban twist on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in a twenty-first century update designed for children. The setting of a pair of semi-detached houses in Verona Drive was scene of an age-old raging feud between the Montague and Capulet families with visual cues of Red and the Blue painted households and gnomes in their adjoining front and back gardens. The stylistic vernacular is the territory of Dunroamin familiar to the British. Dreamworks' *Over the Hedge* (2006) also hinted at similar themes in poking fun at the futility of narrow-minded parochialism implied by the sense of exclusionary practices that suburbs conjure up with the wasting of food and disregard for the environment also criticized – all from the perspective (and at the eye level) of backyard animals. Even if the suburbs as we see them in popular culture are geographically idealized and in political-administrative terms they are territorially bounded, suburbia as a set of attitudes cannot be cordoned off from its wider global, national, regional and local networks.

Popular culture was seen by Frankfurt School sociologists as a means through which dominant values are reaffirmed. The function of representations was to reproduce cultural norms be this quintessential Englishness or the American dream. The old model of popular culture forcibly effecting a systematic reproduction and reaffirmation of stereotypes, if it ever held true in the first place, is increasingly difficult to sustain given the flowering of new interactive cultural forms. For many years it felt as though portrayals of suburbia appeared to have responded very little in the changes to suburbia's increasing demographic and economic diversity. Cultural constructions of suburbia accordingly seemed to have conformed to an ideal type with the comfortably off white nuclear family, headed by male breadwinner dad and doting housewife mother repeatedly portrayed in films, television and even pop music and the novel. However changes appear to be underway. Recent years are showing a new narrative of economic uncertainty pervade the images we receive of suburbia through the media: popular culture does not operate divorced from national and international contexts or the prevailing political context. Reality television has been fastest to capture this historical moment with a clutch of programmes reflecting the recessionary climate as seen in Chapter 5. There is now growing recognition on the part of television programme-makers as well as viewers that white suburbia no longer represents

the only legitimate suburban form worthy of being beamed at the masses. After years of accusations of its television sitcoms being unreflective of changes in British society, in 2011 the BBC axed the programme *My Family* following an 11-year run. The official reason was that it was time to move comedy on following the leaving of the nest of all of the children in the show. Critics were keen to dance on the grave of the show which had been most notable for its narrowness of focus with a cloyingly smug white middle-class suburban nuclear unit at its core (Gee 2011). It seemed that the constituency that primetime suburban family sitcom is aimed at and depicts is fragmenting. Suburban television must constantly update itself: the *Sopranos* and *Desperate Housewives* may have ended in the US but their “dramedy” style live on in *Breaking Bad* and *Suburgatory*. Other public discourses saw opponents of depicting diversity marginalized: when the producer of ITV’s *Midsomer Murders*, set in an English village declared that he believed that the programme had succeeded due to its all-white cast, an inevitably media-led debate on plausibility and racism ensued and his swift sacking followed. The programme was not (even) set in suburbia but the furor showed the unacceptability of such statements in 2011. Old media offered a minimal level of interaction but today’s cultural consumers are not always voiceless and powerless, for example reality shows audience role is decisive. Now more than ever all cultural texts exhibit inter-textuality, where they are inter-related to other texts. With forums and blogs the product in itself is never complete, it is difficult to ever have the final word.

It is important to remember that the mass-produced popular culture that communicates the suburban condition to us today exists in the shadow of previous versions: both the suburbs and television, novels pop, and film all now have a legacy and archival history rich for postmodern plunder. It is for this reason that cultural products as diverse as Blur’s *Modern Life is Rubbish* album, Malkani’s *Londonstani*, the film *Far from Heaven* and *The Simpsons* contain liberal sprinklings of pastiche, parody and satire among their constituent elements. Suburban commuting clerks or pen-pushers of the Pooter variety of today will most likely have a lengthened journey into the city as suburbia has expanded in enormity and their work now would involve IT making them instead button-pressers. They need not however keep their diaries simply to themselves: a worldwide audience is beckoned by social media, tweeting and blogging if they should wish to bring their thoughts to wider attention. The small screen has become bigger in terms of display inches but flatter in depth. We no longer talk of demand on the UK national grid at big televisual spectacles as the system struggles to cope when people put on the kettle after, for example as with the shooting of JR on *Dallas* (1980) but even with the changed way in which we view television, some 25 million in the United Kingdom still watched 2011’s Royal Wedding live. Formats also alter as appetites have

changed. Canned laughter is now rare on television sitcom, indeed the sitcom in its old incarnation is itself rare having been replaced by newer forms such as the comedy drama (*Shameless Desperate Housewives*), improvisation-based comedy (*Outnumbered*) and other shows which are filmed in almost documentary style (*The Royle Family*, *The Office*). With time what is new and improved can also become familiar as was the case with alternative humour with its studied amateurism as seen in *The Young Ones*. While we may be frustrated at how the lives of suburb-dwellers onscreen appear to be ones of tranquil insularity, the fact that shooting schedules cannot foresee real time events in part explains this. In *Mad Men* historical events like the Kennedy assassination serve as a framing device for the drama but this is only possible as the show is being made decades after these occurrences and we see things through twenty-first-century filters of acceptability. In the same way as the film *Far from Heaven* does, the tv series *Mad Men* shows subversion of the narrow-minded attitudes of the past. In *A Single Man* (2009), a grieving gay male struggles to come to terms with being denied access to his dead partner's funeral as it has been restricted to 'close family only'. Legrain (2011:38) is among those who debunk the myth of a former golden age claiming that in the 1950s 'Britain, for instance, was a country riven by class, where women were second-class citizens and gays imprisoned'. It is erroneous to cling on to an imagined past that never was and the safe distance of these two examples representing and the 1950s/1960s era of their setting exposes the faults of these times.

The heterogeneity and capacity for reinvention/renewal of suburban pop music and indeed of suburban strains of all of the popular cultural forms discussed here expose as hollow the idea that popular culture is all about reproduction of traditional norms. Among television ratings successes of recent years was ITV's *Downton Abbey*, a portrayal of decadent toffs in a country house at the turn of the last century. The BBC followed suit with a dusting off of 1970s hit *Upstairs Downstairs* remade for the twentieth century as a highlight of the Christmas 2010 programming schedule. The 1980s recession spawned the popular *Brideshead Revisited* and various Victorian era-set nostalgia programmes (*Last Days of the Raj*, *Jewel in the Crown*, *Passage to India*). Perhaps when times are hard we retreat into nostalgia, costume drama and period pieces of when Britannia really did rule the waves. Elsewhere other offerings during the same festive 2010 season included re-runs of less lavish television suburban-set Christmas specials picturing humdrum 1970s suburbia: *Terry and June* (in which an empty nester middle-aged couple in Purley quiver at the thought of the boss Sir Denis popping in), the *Good Life* (domestic sustainability practiced by a couple whose male wage-earner turns his back on the rat race unlike the materialist couple next door) and *Butterflies* (an inept, i.e. bad-at-cooking housewife

who daydreams about her love for a mysterious dark stranger which is unrequited). In an age of complexity the throwback to simpler times is striking. Seen from the standpoint of the new millennium viewers of these programmes will now regard them as historical artefact with added kitsch value.

We are fortunate to have the gains of feminism to take for granted: recognized rights which were once the hard-fought such as nursery entitlement, paternity and maternity leave, abortion, fertility treatment, contraception and equal pay – albeit with glass ceilings in place. The same point can be made about anti-discrimination legislation with reference to gays, ethnic and religious minorities who are all part of modern suburban population composition. Yet there is still a way to go to achieve true equality and the realization of ‘having it all’. The modern woman in suburbia or society at large is much more likely than that of her mother’s generation to be economically independent, better educated, earning a higher salary in a more professional position, better represented in politics and single/childless for longer. Yet as pointed out by Hilary Clinton on her last day of office as US Secretary of State achieving gender equality remains the unfinished business of the twentieth century. Unlike Marxist feminists we should recognize in the words of Bill Clinton, it is not just ‘the economy stupid’ but we should seek to change culture too to continue to combat injustice on the basis of gender, sexuality and ethnicity. In her autobiography Margaret Thatcher claimed that in her career as a woman in politics she needed to be better than the men around her to compensate for her gender; it seems wrong that women should only be able make it by apeing men and on masculine terms. Women’s additional roles mean that they are frequently doing a “triple shift” of homemaker/work/childcare. It is equally important that one type of dependence (on men) or bondage (to the housework) is not substituted for another in enslavement by the working routine or to the vagaries of fashion, which McRobbie (2009) fears can be seen in reality/lifestyle programmes such as *What Not to Wear* and *Ten Years Younger* whereby old social hierarchies are re-established in the view presented of the ideal woman, often all the more pernicious as castigation of those ‘who get it wrong’ is by women. Just as Friedan noted in the 1960s women are still juggling multiple roles: in our ageing society being carer to elderly parents is also a modern responsibility. Additionally grandparenting now includes childcare responsibilities as lone parents and couples must work all the hours that god sends in an attempt to service a suburban lifestyle as housing and childcare costs rise.

Each chapter of this book has dealt with a separate aspect of popular culture in order to seek a better understanding of the suburbs. Just as suburbia means multiple things, popular cultural platforms and channels have diversified dramatically in recent history offering overlapping pleasures of its texts. The old order of cultural custodians has been challenged by new and social media. Transformation has

been rapid. As an avid consumer of cultural products spanning five decades I can note that I was initially raised in a household with only one black and white television receiver. For much of my youth there were only three British television channels (pre-Channel 4 in 1982).<sup>1</sup> Now there are countless alternatives on offer to anyone looking to access popular culture in our modern multi-channel, multi-platform world. You need not even own a television set to watch television thanks to online catch-up services. The CD was once revolutionary succeeding the once revolutionary cassette. The latter inspired both the volumes of Du Gay et al. (1997) and Bull (2000) on personal stereo, that is magnetic tape player, but both this and the CD now are distinctly archaic as music has dematerialized in digital downloads making a solid disc look demoded. The multiplicity of ways that media can be received also is a factor for consideration. People may listen to music or watch television or films for a number of reasons: diversion and escape from everyday situations or concerns, to satisfy curiosity, to alleviate boredom or to identify with particular products or values (Huq 2006). These basic functions have been termed as a consideration of 'Uses and Gratifications' (McQuail 1972; McQuail et al. 1972). Watching television in early adverts for television sets was portrayed as a group activity with a box of delights centrally positioned in communal space acting as a bonding mechanism for the (implicitly white nuclear) family but in reality it may be a side or supplementary activity, the other things it is secondary to are multiplied with the availability of new media allowing people to be in front of the internet and television at once. While Hoggart wrote famously on the uses of literacy (1958) the uses of media and popular culture have multiplied and people do not just devote their attention to one form at a time. Many television programmes will now have a hash tag for a twitter feed given out regularly on the show inviting viewers to publically comment and share their instantaneous reactions with others while they watch. Part of the attraction of television as marketed to the suburb dweller was that it was a night out on the town without the risk of leaving your front door. In this way it was a cultural leveller. In theory Broadband too is just a preserve of the suburban as it is for the city dweller and country resident – although connection times can be frustratingly slow in some rural locations.

Cunningham (2004:424) refers to Victorian times in stating 'It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that suburbia should be recognized at least as much by attitude as by location. If it was not always easy to tell what or where a "suburb" was, it was always simple to define something as "suburban": the object becomes less nominal than adjectival, less a bounded entity than a conglomeration of attitudes'. The observation still holds true: the suburb is in many ways looked down on as the second-order city: of its margins and not really an integral part of it. Suburban popular culture often seems to mirror this condescension: taking

place in comic context. Yet in the downturn, imagery of the suburbs as self-satisfied and (semi) detached from the harshness of city life is out of line with reality: hard times on the edge are upon us as I have written elsewhere (Huq 2011; 2013). The complexity of the outer city is just as pronounced as it is at the core of the metropolis. Insecurity breeds falling living standards in both. For years now it has been claimed that there is cultural convergence too between national cultures sped up by globalization and cultural imperialism. Taylor (2000:138) is not alone in arguing that we are witnessing 'the Americanization of British everyday life'. The US Right-wing Tea Party movement have led a nostalgic campaign for the America that their fathers and the founding fathers knew (Tea Party Patriots 2010). Among slogans used by the French student protestors both in late 2010 and earlier against proposed pension reforms has been 'We want what our parents had' (Dilday 2006). Popular culture can be a catalyst for cultural incorporation, validation and reproduction, for example as a barometer for the acceptability of ethnic communities or presenting suburbia as an ideal type category. Some of the examples looked at are whimsical others are more angry. Some are trashy and low-budget (the low-fi of punk, shoestring independent cinema, the British situation comedies where it almost looks like the plywood sets quiver at times). Others have had serious money spent on them and generated large receipts. Suburbia needs to be considered in a frame of reference away from the ever-looming shadow of *Terry and June*. Politically suburbia is slowly shifting centre-stage, in the UK for example, in talk of the 'squeezed middle' and the ring doughnut strategy pursued by Boris Johnson successfully when mayoral candidate for London. After years of neglect from policy-makers this can only be welcomed (Huq 2013).

In the episode of BBC2 anarchic student flat-sharing commentary *The Young Ones* that the quote at the top of this chapter is drawn, the hippie character Neil's parents who pay him a visit and his dad asks him despairingly 'Why can't you be in one of those decent situation comedies that your mother likes?' Some surreal banter follows before the opening titles of the *Good Life* with gentle woodwind melody strike up before the punk character Vivian rips his way through the picture to declare 'We're not watching the bloody *Good Life*' before shouting a volley of 'bloody bloody' exclamations and making the statement above. Alternative comedy, to which stable *The Young Ones* belonged, was itself culturally significant in the 1980s when it emerged as it deliberately set out to be anti-racist and anti-sexist unlike the sitcoms and stand-up performers of old and appeal to a youth audience-share in the process. The point being made by Vivian above that is that there is a mismatch between the suburban niceness we are invited to view on the *Good Life* and the harsher reality of modern Britain. The status quo

that viewers are invited to uphold is being for once disrupted not perpetuated. Certainly many features that have become present now on the suburban landscape were long ignored by television, film, novels and to a lesser degree pop. In consequence the suburbia as seen in some of the best-known historic depictions is probably more of a symbolic landscape than a real place where lifeworlds are territorially bounded and geographically idealized as far from danger with women and children first and the male breadwinner working hard in the cut-throat city to provide them their privileged suburban life. Within this set-up the most obvious historic omissions include ethnic diversity and the working classes. At other times television has played on a mismatch principle where new *arrivistes* are transplanted to the suburbs particularly in comedy, for example *Birds of a Feather* with two east-end girls made-good moving to nouveau-riche suburban Chigwell in Essex. However in the second decade of the second millennium it is now impossible to imagine humour derived from a situation such as that in *Mixed Blessings* or *Love Thy Neighbour* or a character such as the stereotyped Japanese/Chinese neighbour played by Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffanys*.

Portrayals produced retrospectively set in earlier time periods show that anxiety and tension have always been present in the suburbs even if contemporaneous depictions did not always cover this: for example, the multiple neuroses of Betty from *Mad Men* as compared to relatively carefree life of the character played by Doris Day in *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*. The climate seems to be ever-sunny in both and both women are housewives but Betty feels repressed and lacking satisfaction whereas Day's character throws herself into organizing the school-play. Doubtless many of the audiences of earlier onscreen depictions would have found difficulty recognizing their lives in the idyllic suburbia with all problems airbrushed away as seen in earlier eras which glossed over the negative features of suburbia. Today most would most likely have to be working mums to make ends meet. In an age of media literacy it seems less likely that audiences will unthinkingly swallow what is served up before them without programme-makers being aware of disapproval, which can be registered by tweeting or in the founding of a Facebook group in seconds. Mike's *Young Ones* rejoinder 'That's a highly articulate outburst there, Vyv. I only hope they're not watching', is less easy to hope for with i-player and YouTube archiving television history on a scale never seen before. Un-missable television and the songs you can't live without hearing have a new double-meaning as opportunities to access them expand rendering them unavoidable. Some time ago Iain Chambers (1986:196) talked of 'protected suburban livers [sic], distant from the inner-city zones of poverty and neglect'. In contemporary times this sounds hopelessly outmoded as the two categories are becoming ever-more

similar in their characteristics. The move to the suburbs often signalled a relief for pent up city-dwellers, an exhalation of air. By the late 1970s with rising oil prices and pressures on working wives an ITV suburban-set sitcom had appeared called *A Sharp Intake of Breath* with a title capturing the reverse. Anxious times on the edge are evermore present with the onset of the financial downturn. Nevertheless both suburbia and the popular culture that represent it are far more dynamic than has been assumed by their critics. As the chapters of this book have shown, in keeping with the ‘vibrancy’ marketing claim of suburban boroughs, the contemporary suburb has a vitality that cannot be overlooked due to its urban mix of ethnic, religious, age, cultural, land-use and racial diversity. In the US too public policy has responded to suburban happenings: in December 2012 a horrific school shooting at Newtown, Connecticut, long featured in US suburban depictions as at the edge of New York looked almost certain to usher in attempts at tightening American gun laws.

Future directions for the popular culture’s representation of suburbia are likely to be shaped by technological advance. Moores (2004:23) has argued that the media settings of phenomena including the internet and mobile phones are overlaid with the physical location of the users and that ‘electronically mediated communication transcends the boundaries of physical settings.’ As we have seen throughout digital communications mean a dematerialization of some popular cultural form, for example book to e-book and CD to MP3 or i-tunes file and played through services like Lastfm or Spotify which serve as digital jukeboxes. Onscreen representations are accessed differently, for example streamed via digital catch up services, on YouTube or through on-demand services like Netflix or Lovefilm. Even the cinema has changed from suburban high street fleapit to exurban leisure park. New technology brings new forms of cultural spectacle. At a public lecture at the London School of Economics (LSE) Paul Gilroy (2012) termed a range of phenomena of electronically perpetuated racism ‘digitalia’. This includes the rash of internet racism videos, for example the woman spouting racial abuse on the Croydon tram in 2011 that went viral, who he pointed out was a member of the white dispossessed working class from New Addington, a council estate in Croydon borough making it effectively a suburb of a suburb. These are accompanied by user commentary as occurs with all youtube content. Other examples where social media became the news itself included the Robin Hood airport tweeter who was likened to John Betjeman and the poem ‘Slough’ for his tweet: ‘Crap! Robin Hood Airport is closed. You’ve got a week and a bit to get your sh\*\* together, otherwise I’m blowing the airport sky high.’ His claim that it was sent during a moment of frustration while the airport in England’s midlands region was closed by snow was finally accepted when the initial verdict

which saw him being fined for sending a 'menacing tweet' was overturned by appeal. He was flanked by comedians/prolific tweeters Al Murray and British 'national treasure', Stephen Fry, during his court appearance. Twitter in part has assumed such popularity as it allows the ordinary person in the suburbs feel connected to the celebrities that they follow and direct post to their newsfeed in instantaneous real time. Various public figures have come a cropper after hasty tweets which had to be hastily withdrawn as they had had no clearance from further up the chain, for example Labour's Diane Abbot MP for saying that whites like to play a game of divide and rule or Adian Burley the Conservative MP who tweeted that the widely praised London 2012 Olympic games opening ceremony staged by Danny Boyle, the director of *Trainspotting* and *Slumdog Millionaire* was 'lefty multicultural crap'. These interactions also show how the boundaries of public and private are blurring. You do not even have to be present to be an expert on suburban viral events, or even in the same country as their unfolding. Footage of rioting in suburban areas such as Ealing and Croydon shot on camera phones seeped out on YouTube in 2011 inspiring academic articles and blogposts aplenty (Huq 2013a). In 2012 I witnessed a presentation from a professor from Finland at a conference in Istanbul, Turkey, talking about racial abuse on a tram in New Addington (Dervin 2012).

As the global financial crisis took root Farrar (2008) claimed for CNN 'Devastated by the subprime mortgage crisis, hundreds of homes have been foreclosed and thousands of residents have been forced to move, leaving in their wake a not-so-pleasant path of empty houses, unkempt lawns, vacant strip malls, graffiti-sprayed desolate sidewalks and even increased crime.' The assumptions made by the *Young Ones* sketch of suburbia as unremittingly nice no longer hold and arguably never did. The office space in suburbs and number of people working from home who do not require offices to do so thanks to broadband for example belies them as simply dormitory towns to service a city-working population. The argument that suburbia needs to be treated on its own terms seems to be gaining ground just at the same moment that it is taking on more and more urban characteristics. After all what we think of as the suburbs changes over time. Put another way yesterday's suburbia is often the inner city of today. For Avila (2006) the suburbs meant 'the decentralization of urban life'. Manifold evidence exists of movement in both directions as the inner city and suburb gradually elide into one another. Inner-city gentrification by taking what were multi-occupancy dwellings (typically bedsits) into single-family ownership with their own gardens is actually upholding the suburban ideal that it was a reaction against, in effect suburbanizing the city. The gated community is nothing if not

a modern twist on the suburban home where defensible space rules supreme. *Slate* magazine (Lemann 1997) declares that 'suburbia won'. While this might be overstating the case by implying that the suburb and inner city have been at war, the popular culture examples discussed vividly serve as evidence of the dynamic nature of the suburbs; these are not dead places but very much alive being both creative and a stimulus for creativity. From the Essex marshes of *Fishtank* to the slang-filled neon-lit streets of *Londonstani's* Hounslow via multiple examples of suburbs in the US, Canada and Australia, representations of the suburbs are increasingly voluminous and diverse. As for the 'happy ending' that all good cultural products crave, it can be concluded that suburbia is a concept that is constantly in a state of renewal but importantly one for which it is far from the end of the road.

## Note

- 1 Indeed the BBC had only one channel until ITV began broadcasting in 1955, although this is before my recollection.