

Like Nothing on This Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt

By Tony Hughes-D'Aeth
UWAP, 520pp, 2017

Suburban Space, the Novel and Australian Modernity

By Brigid Rooney
Anthem, 250pp, 2018

Reviewed by Meg Brayshaw

IN HIS LANDMARK WORK OF SPATIAL HISTORY *THE ROAD TO BOTANY BAY* (1988), PAUL Carter delineates the close relationship between Australian space and language. The modern settler nation was inaugurated not only through the invaders' physical presence but also their assertion of linguistic control through written documentation. Accordingly, space, place and land often frame investigations of settler Australian literature and culture. Despite this, however, the transnational fervour for place-based literary studies and literary geography has not produced an abundance of site-specific critical monographs on place in Australian literature. In this context, Tony Hughes-d'Aeth's *Like Nothing on This Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt* (UWAP, 2017) and Brigid Rooney's *Suburban Space, The Novel and Australian Modernity* (Anthem, 2018) are significant recent works of Australian scholarship, offering careful and compelling critical investigations of the complex meaning-making relations of space, place and text.

In form and function, wheatbelt and suburb are very different spaces, and they structure monographs of different approach and scope. Roughly seventy per cent of the Australian population lives in the suburbs, but suburbia is difficult to define and locate definitively on a map (Aidan Davison). In her study, Rooney considers representations of specific Australian suburbs and 'suburbia' as a frame of reference and an ideology. The West Australian wheatbelt, on the other hand, is bounded space of specific geographic co-ordinates, and Hughes-d'Aeth begins his book with a satellite image of the continent's southwest that shows starkly the wheatbelt's enormous reach. Hughes-d'Aeth makes use of an 'event/witness' model; for him, the wheatbelt is best understood as a single event; his chosen writers are witnesses whose work illuminates the singularity of the wheatbelt's

history, geography and most importantly for Hughes-d'Aeth, its enormous ecological impact. The study considers a wide range of forms and modes, from letters and diaries, to poetry and newspaper columns, nature writing and the novel, attending to how each writer's portrayal of the wheatbelt is mediated by generic perspective.

Rooney is exclusively interested in the novel, and novel-suburb as a 'nexus of cultural significance' (9). She begins by affirming that the fictional suburb does not bear 'direct or unmediated relation' to its real-world counterpart; instead, she considers the novel and suburb as "parallel" yet mirroring domains that enact oppositional but reciprocal meaning-making relations' (4, 114). Participating in the new formalist turn in literary studies, Rooney's book traces the politics and possibilities of novelistic form in the context of settler suburban modernity.

Despite differences in subject and approach, Hughes-d'Aeth and Rooney share an understanding of the suburb and the wheatbelt as frontiers of settler colonial modernity powered by capitalist and colonial ideologies. Both track how literary representations reflect, refract and reimagine these spaces, grappling with their ideologies and experimenting with their aesthetic possibilities. Through this work, suburb and wheatbelt emerge as fabricated spaces layered with and structured by memory and forgetting, desire and ambivalence, speaking to—as Rooney writes of suburbia—'the groundlessness of the ground that must serve as the locus of modern belonging' (14).

Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt

The wheatbelt consists of approximately fifty million acres in south-western Australia, cleared in two major stages over sixty years from the turn of the century. Hughes-d'Aeth's literary history recognises the event as an ecological catastrophe: land clearing, erosion, salination and species loss have resulted in 'extinction on a grand scale' (211). He turns to literature in part to 'locate forms of language' capable of capturing the wheatbelt's emergence and the unprecedented scale of its ecological impact (537). Each of the eleven author-specific chapters embeds its writer and their works not only in the history of the wheatbelt, but also in its geography, geology and ecology. The result is an important contribution to the burgeoning body of ecologically-inflected criticism in the Australian humanities.

Hughes-d'Aeth chooses as his witnesses writers who spent a significant or formative amount of time in the wheatbelt, with the exception of Elizabeth Jolley, who never lived in the area despite writing its 'most famous' novel, *The Well* (1986) (433). Each chapter is prefaced with the author's dates and a list of the wheatbelt locations in which they lived; the majority feature personal photographs taken in those places: seventeen-year-old Dorothy Hewett sat in a

field of wheat, John Kinsella as a child playing cricket in a field, and—somewhat disconcertingly—an eagle strung up between two trees, shot by Cyril E. Goode. This emphasises Hughes-D'Aeth's 'event/witness' model, in which each writer offers a 'crucial', 'key' or 'vital' account of some aspect or understanding of the wheatbelt experience (323, 173, 105). Over the course of the study, this model yields a range of wheatbelts: mythic, moral, strange, tragic, existential, gothic, and in the work of the study's most contemporary writer John Kinsella, an 'allegory for post-humanist despair' (525).

The first third of the book is devoted to writers who built the wheatbelt literally and in literature. Albert Facey, Cyril E. Goode, James Pollard and John Keith Ewers either directly helped or were present during the initial phase of land clearing, and were responsible for some of its first literary reflections. It seems that it took some time for the wheatbelt to be opened up to narrative fiction: Hughes-d'Aeth deals first with letters, memoir, newspaper columns and poetry. In these early chapters we see a number of the book's key themes emerge. The most significant is the 'ideology of wheat', a 'complicated fantasy' variously involving 'self-sufficiency, collective action, masculine labour, celebration of fertility, return to nature and its thorough eradication' (105). It also involves wilful ignorance of the wheatbelt's imbrication with capitalist modernity, which Hughes-d'Aeth notes frequently. Throughout the book we see writers forge, champion, trouble and reject the ideology of wheat. Ewers' Avea Lea novels introduce the saga to the wheatbelt, a genre that seems particularly suited to the wheatbelt's ideological underpinnings and essentially 'bourgeois' structure (33). Later, the study revisits the genre with Tom Flood's Miles Franklin Award-winning *Oceana Fine* (1989), a somewhat demented, digressive saga that Hughes-d'Aeth calls 'the great Australian Wheatbelt Novel' for its portrayal of a wheatbelt existing 'simultaneously in the planes of family, economics, ecology, history and metaphysics' (489).

Jack Davis serves as Hughes-d'Aeth's only Indigenous witness to the wheatbelt, though the chapter on Davis includes reference to other wheatbelt works by Aboriginal writers. Here we see the ideology of wheat exposed for its association with the racist machinery of settler colonialism, particularly the system of Aboriginal Protection. Hughes-d'Aeth devotes extended space to meaningful engagement with Davis' important trilogy of plays, *Kullark* (1979), *The Dreamers* (1982) and *No Sugar* (1985). For Hughes-d'Aeth, the basic unit of the wheatbelt was the family, and it was bound up in the ideology of wheat through entrenched systems of production, reproduction and land possession. In Davis' work, the Indigenous family unit takes centre stage, parrying the wheatbelt's 'comprehensive amnesia' of Aboriginal dispossession (325).

Like Nothing on this Earth is also notable for its serious and sustained engagement with Australian nature writing, particularly in chapters on James Pollard and

Barbara York Main. The book inserts the wheatbelt and its literature into the development of the Australian environmental consciousness, the full history of which is yet to be written. Hughes-d'Aeth names Barbara York Main, a zoologist by training, the 'wheatbelt's Rachel Carson' for her ability to harness literary and creative modes to produce environmental writing that exposed the 'environmental price of the wheatbelt's success' (407, 383).

Hughes-d'Aeth identifies the wheatbelt at the nexus of a 'powerful association between work, land and masculinity' (141). Indeed, his book is weighted with male witnesses; only three of the eleven writers are women. Yet, it is Dorothy Hewett whom the study seems to anoint as wheatbelt laureate, if such a figure exists. In her poetry, memoir and the musical drama *The Man from Mukinupin* (1979), 'a number of wheatbelts came to life' (322). These works infuse the wheatbelt with a 'sparkling ambivalence' that is uniquely Hewett's, combining 'psychology, fairytale, social history and family romance in a beguiling, almost taunting, pantomime, in a manner pioneered in the drama of Bertolt Brecht' (298).

In the epilogue, 'The Wheatbelt in Deep Time', Hughes-D'Aeth reminds us that the work of the book has been to refigure writers from across the span of the twentieth century as witnesses to the wheatbelt as a singular event executed swiftly in the deep time of ecology. Framing the wheatbelt in this way disrupts the historicism of settler Australian modernity. For Hughes-d'Aeth, the wheatbelt is characterised by a 'sort of perpetual belatedness', pointing to a 'crisis in temporality' that makes it symptomatic of the Anthropocene, the era in which the devastation we have wrought is already written in the geological record (551). By augmenting his literary history with geography, geology and ecology, Hughes-d'Aeth leaves us imagining the wheatbelt etched into this record like a scar.

Suburban Space, the Novel and Australian Modernity

In 1964 Donald Horne declared Australia 'the first suburban nation', employing the phrase to denote the difference between this demographic and geographic reality and Australia's self-image, which was founded in large part on the powerful bush/city dyad (cited in G. Davison 40). Yet, as Brigid Rooney explains in *Suburban Space, the Novel and Australian Modernity*, suburbia is the locus of 'everyday settler belonging', 'a vehicle for modernity's amnesic colonization and repression of place' (86). Like the wheatbelt, the suburb is a site that generates literary representations charged with ambivalence, but its elasticity as a place and concept perhaps affords greater freedom 'to flex through time, space and scale, from house to city region to nation and globe' (82). Indeed, a significant contribution of Rooney's work is its placement of the Australian suburban novel within world literature, maintaining its local and national specificity while simultaneously unpicking its position in transnational networks of meaning-making.

Rooney's study is underpinned by attention to the mutual affordances of suburb and novel as forms, with an understanding of how both are shaped by and in turn shape settler Australian modernity. By tracing how 'suburban sites, tropes, images and objects' inform narrative dynamics, Rooney constructs an expansive archive of Australian suburban fiction featuring multiple works from twenty-four writers (2). Within this archive Rooney makes generative and sometimes surprising connections: Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) and Peter Carey's *The Tax Inspector* (1991) share interest in 'cultural involution and insularity' through mutual deployment of the trope of incest (147); Steven Carroll's Glenroy series is traced back to modernist forebears including Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Rooney's close readings are astute, complemented by extensive and respectful interface with Australian literary scholarship and a broad range of theoretical insights. Among many others, she draws on David Harvey and Jon Heggund on modernity and modernism, J. Hillis Miller and Claude Lévi-Strauss on narrative form and function, and Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau on space and sociality.

The book employs a roughly chronological structure. It is the first survey to engage closely with pre-1945 suburban literature, beginning with a chapter on D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo* (1923). Rooney acknowledges that this is a somewhat unexpected choice, but it is made carefully: the reading establishes the study's transnational scope and underscores the capacity of Lawrence's outsider perspective to denaturalise 'the assumed priority and provenance of settler Australian writing' (17). Rooney's exploration of Lawrence's 'bungalow modernism' inaugurates her focus on the suburban home and its domestic interior, figured as a complex 'site of attachment' that 'amplifies, mediates and challenges binaries of public and private, insiders and outsiders, home and homelessness, hospitality and estrangement' (17).

A strength of Rooney's study is its parsing of the gendered, classed and racial aspects of the suburb and the Australian novel. The book maps out a trajectory of Australian women writers and their 'resistant, critical or anti-suburban depictions of gendered domestic and working spaces' (39). Readings of pre-1945 work by Christina Stead, Capel Boake and Lesbia Harford are followed later by a compelling account of the trope of electricity, harnessed by Elizabeth Harrower, Helen Hodgman and Ellen van Neerven to critique suburbia's patriarchal and colonial origins. Developing a critical frame that could be applied usefully to a range of modernist and contemporary women's writing, Rooney explains how electric shock figures recognition of and resistance to the enfolding of suburban space into the 'electronic and petrochemical arms of the twentieth century's fossil fuel-driven military industrial complex' (103).

The middle section on mid-century suburbia contributes the most thorough evidence to the book's investigation of the 'anti-suburban drive' and its literary critique, unsettling assumed readings of writers canonical to Australian anti-suburban fiction: George Johnston and Patrick White (3). The focus text of Rooney's chapter on White is the pastoral drama *The Tree of Man* (1955), to which she attributes a 'panoramic and generic bridging of bush, city and suburb' (18). By reading White's more clearly (and more ostensibly satirical) suburban writing through *The Tree of Man*, Rooney exposes the performative, theatrical aspects of White's suburbia, and how its spaces provide a stage for the shifting of 'scales and perspective, from the homely to the global' (63).

Rooney's reading of what is perhaps the literary *fons et origo* of Australian anti-suburban discourse, Johnston's *bildungsroman* *My Brother Jack* (1964), places the novel in the context of the Hydra trilogy of which it is the first volume, and groups it with other works of expatriate literature by Barbara Hanrahan, David Malouf and Jessica Anderson. Finding in these novels 'suburban worlds both spurned and exquisitely conjured', Rooney argues that the returning gaze of the expatriate locks onto the suburban house as a primal locus of memory and desire (80). Taken together in the context of the wider study, Rooney's reading of mid-century writing suggests the existence of a kind of suburban Australian modernism, written not—as has long been suggested—against the suburb but in concert with it, and through the narrative energy yielded by its densely affective spaces.

The final third of the book adopts the term 'Post-Suburbia' as a space-time marker for the suburb in late capitalism, with reference to Ulrich Beck's second modernity and a nod to Sneja Gunew's post-multiculturalism. The novels Rooney considers here are 'critically reflexive' works of 'novelistic renovation' that write back to the modernist suburban tradition or challenge and reframe it with Indigenous, migrant and minority perspectives (124). In novels of outer suburbia by Melissa Lucashenko, Peter Carey and Luke Carman, Rooney shows how 'the settler frontier is reconstituted and reworked, often around themes of neglect, marginalization and social stigma' (142). Offering possibly the first scholarly criticism of Michael Mohammed Ahmad's *The Tribe* and Omar Musa's *Here Come the Dogs* (both published 2014), Rooney pairs these novels with work by Christos Tsiolkas and Michelle de Kretser, reading them in part through Derrida's concept of hospitality. In an analysis unhappily relevant to contemporary Australian politics, Rooney argues that these writers unsettle 'norms that patrol the border of the so-called national literature' (172).

Rooney concludes with a coda centered on Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), in which the settler suburban house appears as a 'node of power within the petrochemical world and host for the trauma of colonization from an Indigenous perspective' (184). Thus, the study leaves us with the important reminder that

sovereignty of the land upon which suburbia sprawls was never ceded. In extensive detail, *Suburban Space, the Novel and Australian Modernity* draws the 'infinitely expandable' map of Australian literary suburbia, showing how its paths cross and divert, loop back through time and reach out to the rest of the world (182). Rooney's study is also notable for its sustained investigation of the capacities and contradictions of the Australian novel in the century it rose to prominence. In its telescopic consideration of the novel as a distinct form emerging from and existing in close relationship with Australian settler modernity, Rooney's book is an important contribution to numerous scholarly conversations in Australian literary studies today.

Conclusion

Despite their many and obvious differences, when viewed from above suburbia and wheatbelt are aesthetically quite similar. Aerial photographers are drawn to the stark colours and sharp right angles of the wheatbelt's stripped fields, which are interrupted only infrequently by muddy dams and patches of uncleared bushland. Aerial images of new suburbs in Sydney's Greater Macarthur Region—currently undergoing enormous and somewhat haphazard expansion and development—show tightly packed rows of dark grey, heat-attracting roofs framed by colorbond fencing. Occasionally there are blocks of land yet to be built on, squares of dirt the colour of wheat fields seen from the sky. These images reveal the shared truth of suburb and wheatbelt: they are regimented, highly fabricated landscapes, and they take effort to maintain.

In *The Road to Botany Bay*, Carter identifies early accounts of settlement as works of 'narrative fiction', a 'rhetorical rationalization designed to neutralize the reality of a space that was turbulent, unpredictable, rebellious' (305). In their studies, Hughes-d'Aeth and Rooney make similar assertions about their focus spaces. Over ten generations, Rooney writes, suburbia has 'built itself by destroying and forgetting even its own recent past, ignorant of the ancient stories that belong to the earth beneath' (183). Thus, it is a space that is 'inherently unsettling and uncanny, both product and agent of colonization's mapping, acquisition and classification of property' (183). Hughes-d'Aeth notes the 'accelerated historicism' of accounts of the wheatbelt: 'there is no present tense,' he writes, 'one never fully connects with the place as a point of origin, but rather as a latecomer to the scene' (551). 'Is this the function of novels,' Rooney asks late in her study, 'to fabricate virtual belonging to the places we continually discard and forget in our quest to move on?' (184).

Like Carter, Hughes-d'Aeth and Rooney work to 'make cloudy again the line between language and space' (*The Road to Botany Bay* 36). Both studies cultivate a kind of 'regressive unsettling', as Hughes-d'Aeth writes of John Kinsella's

poetry (517). In the 'alienated zone' of the wheatbelt, Hughes-d'Aeth looks for memories of 'the previous, marvellously intricate living world', held by remnant bushland and the 'enduring lifeways' of the Noongar and other Indigenous groups (551). Rooney registers 'gaps in the suburban plot... sounds, sights and uncanny presences either not there, or barely perceptible, through the levelled, denuded landscape' (15).

What Hughes-d'Aeth and Rooney add to Carter's account is a reckoning with the ecological impact of the fabricated spaces of settler modernity. Hughes-d'Aeth's critique is more forceful, but it is present in Rooney's study as well. They both register that if the ground beneath wheatbelt and suburbia is 'turbulent and unpredictable', it is made so by the environmentally-destructive effort to maintain the artificial landscapes above. The studies locate wheatbelt and suburb in deep time, reading and writing these spaces into a history that extends long before 1788. Rooney sets 'the temporal reach of Aboriginal stories of place alongside that of settler-suburban modernity' to highlight the latter's 'impermanence and forgetting' (183); Hughes-d'Aeth hopes his efforts to contextualise the wheatbelt in the Anthropocene may help to 'put an end to the idea of endlessness' that underpins both agricultural endeavour in this country and settler modernity more broadly (556). This is important, urgent work in our current moment. It also leads one to consider the territory left to explore. There is plenty of scope for studies of literature originating in other key sites of Australian modernity: industrial and maritime centres like Newcastle and Fremantle, Tasmania with its chequered colonial and ecological history, the mythic red centre.

Today, much work in literary studies both here and abroad grapples with the stories we tell about the places and environments in which we dwell, with their effects and efficacy in this time of acknowledged crisis. *Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt and Suburban Space, the Novel and Australian Modernity* are investigations of the aesthetics and ideologies of Australian space in literature that testify to the ability of such work to engage with and further discussion of this pressing problematic.

MEG BRAYSHAW completed her PhD in June 2018 and now teaches Australian literature and English at the University of Sydney. Her research interests include new modernisms, urban literature and environmental literary studies.

Works Cited

Carter, Paul. *The Road to Botany Bay*. U Chicago P, 1988.

Davison, Aidan. 'Australian Suburban Imaginaries of Nature: Towards a Prospective History.' *Australian Humanities Review* 37 (2005). <<http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2005/12/01/australian-suburban-imaginaries-of-nature-towards-a-prospective-history/>>.

Davison, Graeme. 'Australia: The First Suburban Nation?' *Journal of Urban History* 22.1 (1995): 40-74.

Hughes-d'Aeth, Tony. *Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt*. UWAP, 2017.

Rooney, Brigid. *Suburban Space, the Novel and Australian Modernity*. Anthem, 2018.