THE FANTASY OF OUTER SUBURBIA AND NEW REPRESENTATIONS OF AUSTRALIANNESS

Abstract: The paper analyzes how Shaun Tan’s 2008 collection of illustrated stories, Tales from Outer Suburbia, has reflected the changing landscape of Australian cultural studies. For decades, Australian cultural studies were focused on the representation of what was perceived and standardized as Australian national identity. This cultural representation was related to the concept of White Australia, thus exclusive of groups that do not conform to the established image of the Australian man, and spatially contextualized within either the bush or the city. By depicting suburbia as a fantastic space, particularly in terms of recent theoretical elaborations of the fantastic of space expounded by Patrícia García, Tan’s Tales from Outer Suburbia provide an effective re-evaluation of suburban spaces and offer resistance to the anti-suburbanism traditionally accepted in Australian culture. In addition, Tales also entail that a change of focus in spatial representation brings about an even more important re-evaluation of Australian national identity. The analysis of two stories from Tales — “No Other Country” and “Stick Figures” — shows a tendency towards a more fluid and inclusive concept not of identity, but rather identities, whereby those groups that have usually been excluded from cultural representation, primarily the immigrants and Australian Aborigines, are now placed in focus through the specific spatial context of suburbia.

Keywords: suburbia, Shaun Tan, Tales from Outer Suburbia, anti-suburbanism, Australian cultural studies, fantastic spaces, heterotopia.

The space of everydayness

Commenting on his 2008 Tales from Outer Suburbia, the Perth-born artist Shaun Tan muses on the contrast frequently found in suburban surroundings, between the mundane and extraordinary, quotidian and fantastic, boring and unsettling (Tan, n.d.). In many of his works — to
name some, the greatly acclaimed and widely popular 2006 wordless graphic novel *The Arrival*, or the 2010 illustrations to John Marsden's story *The Rabbits* – Tan plays upon this contrast between the familiar and fantastic, which he usually contextualizes spatially. Thus the foreign country into which the immigrant in *The Arrival* tries to settle looks pretty much like a distant planet inhabited by impossible creatures and operated on incomprehensible technology, while *The Rabbits* visually centers on the tension between mythical landscape before the white settlement of Australia and the futuristic visions of urban spaces constructed by the newcomers. In their focus on spatiality, both stories delve into relevant historical and social issues (which are certainly not limited to the Australian experience) such as migration and colonization. The here presented analysis of *Tales from Outer Suburbia* similarly focuses on the spatial elements of the *Tales* and, more particularly, on the broader cultural relevance of suburban spaces. Putting special emphasis on two stories from *Tales* – “No Other Country” and “Stick Figures,” this paper posits suburbia as the spatial exponent of the challenge to the dominant ideology behind the historical concept and policies of ‘White Australia’.

*Tales from Outer Suburbia* is a collection of 15 stories, seemingly intended for children, illustrated using various techniques and compiled from vignettes and fragments Tan had made in different sketchbooks over several years. The *Tales* are based at least partly on the author's experience of growing up in the northern suburbia of Perth, which “did feel at the time like the edge of the world, relentlessly ordinary, yet also liberating in being so quiet and uncluttered, and not without a strange beauty.” (Tan, n.d.) Suburbia has also provided inspiration for other works by Tan – paintings and photographs, most of which do not contain any elements of the fantastic – and it is its quality of being ordinary and mundane that he stresses as inspiration. In his 2014 *From Popular Culture to Everyday Life*, John Storey has observed a feature that links popular culture, the concept of place and everydayness in any attempt to theoretically define these concepts. For appearing all too obvious and taken for granted, they are often dismissed as residual categories: trivial, uneventful or inauthentic (everyday life), less worthy (popular culture) or simple (the concept of place). Suburbia in Tan’s *Tales* is where all three residual categories intersect, which has a particular significance in the context of Australian cultural studies. It is, namely, the place that has
always been left out of the mainstream cultural and artistic practices in Australia, in a process that Garry Kinnane calls ‘anti-suburbanism’, within which “Australian cultural energies have worked almost exclusively to privilege the city and the bush as the two poles of experience that matter.” (1998: 42). As “a state of mind” (Tan, n.d.) or “a generalized place in the imagination” (Kinnane, 1998: 42), as well as a geographically locatable realistic place, the concept of suburbia thus relates to the idea of popular culture as a site of struggle, “a terrain of ideological struggle between dominant and subordinate classes, dominant and subordinate cultures.” (Storey, 2008: 10) This implies that Tan’s Tales from Outer Suburbia participate in the process of disarticulating the city and the bush as the only spatial contexts approved by the dominant intellectual elites within the system of cultural production for representing the experience of living in Australia. Prior to outlining the theoretical framework within which such disarticulation is to be observed, it is therefore necessary to provide a brief overview of the development of cultural studies in Australia, referring especially to the question of why the study of culture in general, and popular culture – which is nowadays regarded as a largely global phenomenon – in particular, should at all be observed from a limited perspective designated by a nationality adjective.

Australia on the map of cultural studies

In the piece titled “It works for me’: British cultural studies, Australian cultural studies, Australian film,” Graeme Turner, one of the most prolific authors within the academic field of Australian cultural studies, addressed Ken Ruthven’s 1989 response to the work of Raymond Williams and its implicit universality or internationalism. Turner contended that Ruthven’s argument about the inevitable historical and cultural specificity of any ideological position occupied by debates within cultural studies had in the 1990s gained prominence. In other words, insistence on the universality of concepts elaborated within cultural studies suppresses the difference that is experienced locally – and in order for culture to operate as a site of struggle or negotiation, it has to be placed in a particular social, historical, and political context. What, then, is this context for Australian cultural studies?
The field of cultural studies was initially, in line with the general tendency in Australia towards the uncritical acceptance of everything British, imported from Birmingham. The foundation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964 and the constitutive texts of the new discipline, such as E.P. Thompson’s 1963 *The Making of the English Working Class* or Richard Hoggart’s 1957 *The Uses of Literacy*, formed a critical model for thinking culture that was subversive within the context of British intellectual elite, being based largely on the working-class ethos and anti-authoritarian stance. The same model was adopted in Australia; however, these two features had since the late nineteenth century formed not the subordinate, but rather dominant cultural values in (White) Australia. The working-class ethos was celebrated by images of the difficult conditions of people living in the bush, and the anti-authoritarian stance was directed primarily against the British authorities in the colony. As Graeme Turner put it, by the time cultural studies were imported from Britain to Australia,

> [t]he whole of Australian social history had been reconstructed through a series of determining oppositions which defined an essential Australianness as the subordinated, the repressed, and the resistant: it is a history which throws convicts against the jailers, prospectors against the diggings police, free settlers against squatters, the Digger against the British officer, and so on. (1996: 326)

This meant that the development of cultural studies in Australia was promoted mostly by nationalist groups within literary circles, implying that literature and various other disciplines became “concerned with identifying distinctive features of Australian life.” (Sardar & Van Loon, 2013: 63) Such a course of development was given impetus in the 1970s Australian film industry revival, with the decision of the government to bankroll those films that sought to represent the nation – usually costume dramas or representations of European colonial history (Sardar & Van Loon, 2013; Turner, 1996), such as the classics *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) or *Gallipoli* (1981).

Unlike films, comics rarely received financial support from the Australian government; nevertheless, their themes did not diverge much from the concern with national identity. The *Pictorial Social Studies* series was
launched in 1958 by Australian Visual Education, issuing comics that provided descriptions of “key moments from Australian history, such as the Rum Rebellion or the story of Anzac (Patrick, 2012: 59-60). Subsequent publications celebrated the spatial aspect of the national identity even more pronouncedly, such as Alan Langoulants’ 1990s *Ashe of the Outback*. The question of why spatiality – especially the bush and subsequently the city as the focal points of the Australian landscape – was important to the cultural construction of national identity necessitates a reference to the so-called myth of White Australia, the conscious construction of which began with the establishment of *The Bulletin* magazine in 1880, and was confirmed with Russel Ward’s 1958 publication of *The Australian Legend*. Operating on democratic principles, collecting and publishing ballads and stories from all Australian colonies, then distributing copies to dozens of thousands of households throughout the country, *The Bulletin* succeeded in constructing the image of the Australian man – the image that would nearly a century later be considered quite compliant with the working-class ethos and anti-authoritarianism arriving from the University of Birmingham. This image was of an Australian-born British who is morally and physically superior to the Britain-born British (whom he perceives as the Other, an exponent of the authority he must struggle against) precisely due to the fact that he is forced or has willingly chosen to live and work in the Australian bush, under harsh climate and in nearly impossible living conditions of a country that has yet to be built (Bracalente, 2011). Based on the concept of the white male privilege, the image of the Australian man – the national image – was certainly exclusive of all the groups that did not fit in with this stereotype: women, non-European immigrants (especially those coming from Asia) or the Australian Aborigines. Women were rarely if ever represented in literary works; when they were, their role did not bear much relevance to the topical suffering, hardships, and the eventual victory or defeat of the Australian hero. Following the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, intolerance increased towards the newcomers to the country; in works of fiction they were frequently addressed as pestilence or plague, while the Aboriginal people were merely described as silent shadows giving an appropriate dark backdrop to the overall experience of the White man.
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In terms of spatiality, such an exclusive approach implied that a marginalized position was initially awarded to all the places other than the bush. The city gradually earned its status within the spatial focalization of Australian imagination, following the rapid growth of urban spaces in the wake of the World War One, and partly also due to the appearance between the two wars of bohemian circles of journalists, editors, artists and writers, or prominent individuals such as, to name only a few, Kenneth Slessor or Sidney Nolan. Suburbia, however, remained practically non-existent within the broad scope of cultural imagination in Australia, in pretty much the same way that women, the immigrants and the Aborigines did, and it is perhaps a strange coincidence that Robin Boyd’s *The Australian Ugliness* appeared in 1960, only two years following the publication of *The Australian Legend*, detailing and deploring the aesthetic barrenness of the Australian suburbs (Kinnane, 1998). As Garry Kinnane further put it, the persistent bush/city polarisation has produced a rich vein of Romantic literature, in which imagination has been given preference over observation, such that the worlds in which we have attempted to locate our myths of identity and aspiration have been other than the ones we inhabit daily. (1998: 42).

This image of suburbia was slow to change and, by trying (successfully) to endow suburbia with a vein of the imaginative and the fantastic, Shaun Tan in *Tales from Outer Suburbia* succeeds in recreating the suburbs as a site of struggle where the meaning and value of everyday experiences is articulated as potentially mythical and romantic. The narrative strategy he employs in the process requires a brief contextualization within the fantastic as a mode of writing, with particular reference to the articulation of space in the given mode.
Topography of the unseeable

Writing about the fantastic as a narrative mode – different from either the marvelous or the uncanny – Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* regards its contemporary manifestations not as inventions of some supernatural regions, but rather presentations of “a natural world inverted into something strange, something ‘other’” (1981: 17), whereby this otherness is “not located elsewhere: it is read as a projection of merely human fears and desires transforming the world through subjective perception.” (24) Similarly to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, the fantastic is dialogical; it “enters a dialogue with the ‘real’ and incorporates that dialogue as part of its essential structure” (Jackson, 1981: 36), thus bearing the possibility of challenging “single or unitary ways of seeing.” (36)

Rosemary Jackson offers an insightful, albeit brief, reference to the fantastic in regard to spatiality. She differentiates the fictional geographies of the marvelous from those of the fantastic: while the marvelous constructs spatially elaborate and topographically well defined vivid worlds, the fantastic can only be described in terms of its nothingness, insistence “upon absence, lack, the non-seen, the unseeable” (Jackson, 1981: 45) or the quality of “relatively bleak, empty, indeterminate landscapes, which are less defineable as places than as spaces, as white, grey, or shady blankness” (42). This absence of any distinctive features

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1 Following the paradigm initially established by Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975 [1970]), the marvelous leaves open the possibility of the existence of purely supernatural and magical phenomena, while the uncanny stands opposite, providing a subconscious source and finally a rational explanation of the strange occurrences.

2 The difference between the concepts of space and place has been discussed extensively, perhaps most broadly in Yi-Fu Tuan’s 1977 *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, where the author posited space as a blank sheet, with no fixed patterns or clear lines inscribed into it by means of human activity; once meaning is imposed onto space through such activity, space becomes place. Thus a countless number of places can be created from the more abstract concept of space, depending on the activity performed and its meaning.
can be seen in many illustrations from *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, such as, for example, a black-and-white drawing of a night scene, with lights turned off in all the houses and only a few stray dogs visible in the empty streets (2008: 32-33). It is, however, precisely in darkness and emptiness that the potential for the construction of new meanings dwells; according to Jackson, “[t]hat which is not seen, or which threatens to be un-seeable, can only have a subversive function in relation to an epistemological and metaphysical system which makes ‘I see’ synonymous with ‘I understand’.” (1981: 45) She goes on to assert that “one of the most frequent landscapes of fantasy has” in recent times “been the hollow world, […] surrounded by the real and tangible, but […] itself empty, mere absence.” (1981: 46) It is here useful to refer to a more recent study of the fantastic of place and space, presented in Patricia García’s 2015 *Space and the Postmodern Fantastic in Contemporary Literature*. García first differentiates between the fantastic of space and the fantastic of place, based on “where the dramatic effect of the Fantastic is directed.” (2015: 21) Narratives relying on the fantastic of place focus on a single particular site which acts as a receptacle or host of the strange and inexplicable phenomena, while space in fantastic texts causes the fantastic, rather than simply receive it. As an archetype of the fantastic of space, García further introduces the concept of ‘the fantastic hole’. Similar to and partly based on Rosemary Jackson’s considerations of the ‘unseeability’ inherent in the spaces of the fantastic, the fantastic hole refers to the kind of space that has not yet been charted or codified – a blank space – or that reveals a cavity or perforation in the otherwise solid material structure of spatial relations, thus also embodying ontological and epistemic uncertainties (García, 2015: 38). In fictional texts, according to García, the fantastic hole is frequently represented through a metaphor of a disappearing physical structure (e.g. a house), or in relation to the motif of the ‘pierced map’ – as a certain location that cannot be found in any map. As an illustration, García uses

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3 And many of them are juxtaposed to differently conceived images which show, for instance, a rare mammal from the Indian Ocean stranded on a suburban lawn (Tan, 2008: 36) or a huge buffalo resident of a vacant suburban lot (7).

4 This motif is included in the second last story, „Our Expedition,” in which a street directory suddenly stops at Map 268 and offers no indication of what lies beyond the last charted streets. This uncharted spaces actually is the outer suburbia, as the two brothers acknowledge, venturing out on an expedition to discover what lies beyond
Philippine Vasset’s 2007 book *Un livre blanc*, in which the author explored such hidden blank spaces in a present-day map of Paris, reaching a conclusion that they “are areas belonging to that which society doesn’t want to see: the poor, the immigrant, the neglected, or abandoned.” (García, 2015: 38) Therefore, by being the cause of fantastic occurrences in narrative texts, the fantastic hole not only reveals, as García claims, “the inconsistencies of a (supposedly) coherent and solid structure” (2015: 38) – it also shows that the structure cannot hold without acknowledging and making visible the holes, albeit only through the mode of the fantastic. In the context of the construction of spatiality in the texts celebrating the Australian legend, *Tales from Outer Suburbia* present suburbia precisely in terms of García’s fantastic space: while being blank and uncharted, suburbia is what causes the fantastic events to happen, and does so by functioning as a fantastic hole – embodied in *Tales* in a series of images of disappearing or hidden spaces. Tan’s *Tales*, moreover, reveal a specific connection between the hole on the one hand, and the images of immigrants or Australian Aborigines on the other. This becomes evident from the analysis of two of the *Tales* which follows below.

**The space of perforation**

As the seventh and the eighth stories, “No Other Country” and “Stick Figures” occupy a central position in *Tales from Outer Suburbia*. “No Other Country” opens with an image indicative of poverty – which evokes the above mentioned observation of how the blank spaces/holes in a map are employed for the purpose of hiding that which should not be seen. The concrete in front of the described suburban house has been painted green in order to save money on lawn-mowing; hot water is scarce and often of unnatural color; many of the windows will not open or close properly (Tan, 2008: 56) and “[a]fter paying the mortgage, there was no money left to fix anything” (57). With Christmas approaching, there is enough money only for the cheapest plastic Christmas tree and the children have to make their own decorations from the available paper and foil. All of the described images serve to indicate that the house in question is in some state of Map 268 (Tan, 2008: 87). What they discover is an immense hole, the edge of suburbia, depicted on pages 90 and 91 as a concrete abyss above the clouds.
dilapidation and that the family living in it is poor. That the family is immigrant is not explicitly stated, although it is implied, for instance, by the mention of the troubles the children have to endure at school; it is only on the very last page that an elderly Greek neighbor appears, commenting on how “every house here has the inner courtyard, if you can find it.” (Tan, 2008: 61) Shaun Tan himself made the immigrant status of the characters in this story undoubtedly clear, recollecting in his Comments (n.d.) that he had numerous Italian friends and neighbors while growing up in the Perth suburbs, and that it was only after visiting Italy that he “considered how waves of Mediterranean immigrants must have felt arriving in Perth during the 1950s – not the most cultured or cosmopolitan city in the world at that time – and then often treated as second-class citizens.”

Tan lists two events as sources for “No Other Country”: the childhood memory of his own plastic Christmas tree once melting while stored in the roof-space, due to extremely high summer temperatures, and his later visit to the Santa Maria Novella in Florence, where he found a very peaceful inner courtyard (Comments, n.d.).

As the Christmas tree in “No Other Country” is found melted in the roof-space, the children start trying to save what is left of it. Stepping on a particularly weak part of the ceiling, the youngest child has his foot fall through it, making a literal hole in the structure of the house. As the family frets about the costs of the repair, their confusion rises since they are unable to locate the hole in the lower parts of the house:

They went back up to check again where the foot had gone through – surely either in the laundry or kitchen? It was then that they were struck by a scent of grass, cool stone and tree sap that breezed through the attic. They all inspected the hole closely... It opened into another room altogether, one they didn’t know about – an impossible room, somewhere between the others. Furthermore, it appeared to be outside the house. (Tan, 2008: 57)

At this point in the story, Tan inserts two illustrated pages, showing a darkened landscape featuring suburban homes, other buildings, and lawns, all interspersed with equally dark drawings of animals and floral

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5 The same thought admittedly served as inspiration for *The Arrival*. 
ornaments, and, in the middle of this landscape, a brightly colored portal-shaped image of what fits the description of the Santa Maria Novella inner courtyard (2008: 58-59). The previous pages contain text printed on white, and so do the pages following this illustration — but in the latter, the white background is filled with small drawings of fruit, flowers, birds, or trees, elements used to visually accentuate how the common everyday reality has been altered by the discovery of this new room.

The room is clearly reminiscent of Italy, the homeland of the family, or Europe in general, the ‘old country’, although the depiction of the inner courtyard does not offer complete identification with their old country. It is more like an imagined home, constructed out of the remnants of the family’s memories of home and their desires aimed at finding or making the perfect place in which to live. In other words, it is “somewhere altogether different” (Tan, 2008: 60). While Patricia García has acknowledged the debt her concept of the fantastic hole owes to Foucault’s heterotopias, some further stress should here be placed on it with respect to “No Other Country.” The inner courtyard quite ostensibly embodies the heterotopian function of an “effectively enacted utopia” (Foucault, 1986: 24). It becomes the spot for family retreat, “their special sanctuary” with a palace garden where they can enjoy soaking up the summer sun during the coldest and wettest winters (Tan, 2008: 60). Some form of ritual is also required for the family to enter the hole: they climb down the permanently installed ladder twice a week, as if crossing a symbolic threshold, carrying with them all the things they need for an inner courtyard picnic — offerings made in return for the peace and happiness

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6 Tan acknowledges this in the Comments related to “No Other Country” as “the tendency to idealise one’s homeland in the face of problems and disappointments experienced in a new place” (n.d.). Rather like the suburbia itself, the home acquires a mental representation which distances it from the physical space, which comes to exist only in the memory and imagination of exiles and immigrants.

7 García stresses that the fantastic hole is only an aspect of the Foucauldian heterotopia, one which should be applied to the study of fiction, since “Foucault’s use of the heterotopia relates to the sociohistorical dimension and not to the literary” (2015: 39). This has, however, been contested by recent research in heterotopian studies, which shows that, quite on the contrary, Foucault’s primary intention in describing heterotopias was the application of the concept to the study of literary and other fictional texts (Knight, 2016).
found in this fantastic space. Bearing in mind the standardized views on immigrants as second-class citizens (within the context of Australian history and culture) or, more broadly speaking, their marginal status of what Mary Douglas (1984) describes as placelessness (existing between two spatially delineated worlds and not clearly belonging to either of them), the fantastic hole in “No Other Country” also conforms to the function of crisis heterotopias, “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis” (Foucault, 1986: 24), such as pregnant women or elderly people who are experiencing a liminal stage of development. The fantastic hole, however, also exemplifies a different view on heterotopias given by Foucault in *The Order of Things*, as disturbing spaces which “secretly undermine language,” “shatter or tangle common names,” and “destroy ‘syntax’ in advance” – not merely in terms of linguistics, but the syntax that is applied to all the structures of society, the syntax which makes things hold together (1989: xix). It is in this description of heterotopian spaces that their subversive potential is discovered in the given context of Tan’s story: the fantastic hole as represented in the inner courtyard of the immigrant family first disturbs the spatial order, being both inside and elsewhere, accessible from a certain point and otherwise invisible. Furthermore, it disturbs the social order which places immigrant families in dull suburban settings generally experienced only in terms of bleakness and poverty. The final two pages of the story are illustrated in entirety and present the same contrast of light and darkness as seen on pages 58 and 59, with the same portal-shaped figure in bright colors still present; however, the darkened areas no longer depict the suburban setting and the bright ones do not show the inner courtyard of the Florence church. The two spaces have merged into a unique image of a suburban lawn with the laundry on a drying wire, with the street in the background and an orange tree in the garden, inhabited by the family members observing their daily routine, as well as with birds.

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8 Crisis heterotopia has, according to Foucault, evolved into the heterotopia of deviation in most modern societies, becoming the preserve of “individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm,” such as, for instance, the rest home, psychiatric hospital, or prison (1986: 25). The heterotopian hole in “No Other Country” can certainly be regarded as a heterotopia of deviation in light of the complete disregard of immigrants within the space of Australian literary and cultural production.
deer and fantastic creatures such as a giant cat and a girl with angelic wings (Tan, 2008: 62-63). The illustrations here also depict the abundance that is strikingly absent from the opening images of the story — instead of poverty, the illustration depicts a version of the Garden of Eden with apples and pears scattered all around. That the case of this family is not unique is clarified by the words of the Greek lady neighbor that conclude the story. Suburbia thus becomes composed not of the dreary houses of the poor, but of the spaces that cause and create the fantastic.

The family of immigrants significantly remains unnamed, as do most of the characters that appear in Tales — they are either nameless: the little boy and rare mammal in “Undertow,” grandparents in “Grandpa’s Story,” and unnameable, such as the Japanese man in a spacesuit in “Broken Toys”;
or, even more frequently, silent: the buffalo in “The Water Buffalo”; the foreign exchange student Eric from the eponymous story, who studies “with silent intensity” (Tan, 2008: 10) and, although he is curious and full of questions, his words are never reported in the story; broken pieces of unread poetry that function as the main characters in “Distant Rain”; “The Nameless Holiday” when everyone struggles “to observe the convention of silence” (Tan, 2008: 71); the dysfunctional missiles in “Alert but Not Alarmed”; the dogs in “Wake”.

As such, they all embody the essence of fantasy as, according to Rosemary Jackson, the apprehension of something unnameable which can only be articulated “through suggestion and implication” (1981: 39). A good example of this is “Stick Figures,” which focuses precisely on “the impossibility of naming this unnameable presence, the ‘thing’ which can

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9 Grandpa thus relates the story dating back to the beginning of his married life, stressing silence as another distinctive feature of Tales, apart from namelessness: “Then there was a long and terrible silence, of a kind we had never known before. We refused to even look at each other. It was like all the stones in that desert went down our throats and into our hearts. We wanted to just sink into the ground and stay there forever.” (Tan, 2008: 50)

10 “Wake” is another story that features the fantastic hole in the form of the house that collapses within minutes under an unexpected fire.
be registered in the text only as absence and shadow” (Jackson, 1981: 39). Tan’s stick figures are indeed represented as shadows in a parking lot in the illustration on page 67. The story opens with a description of people who are both unnameable and silent – Tan’s inspiration was, apart from the recollection of numerous scarecrows the suburbs were filled with in his childhood, an outdoor art installation titled “The Silent People,” which featured “several hundred scarecrow-like figures in a field,” partly reminiscent of some ancestral beings (Comments, n.d.):

If they are standing in the middle of the street, it’s easy enough to drive around them, as you would a piece of cardboard or a dead cat. [...] They are not a problem, just another part of the suburban landscape, their brittle legs moving as slowly as clouds. They have always been here, since before anyone remembers, since before the bush was cleared and all the houses were built. (Tan, 2008: 65)

The illustrations accompanying “Stick Figures” show indeed the near impossibility of distinguishing between the figures and their surroundings – the figures are not even easy to notice at first. Since “they have always been here,” they have merged with the landscape and the land itself; their heads are actually clods of earth (Tan, 2008: 66) and, when people beat and torture them (something they do on a regular basis, particularly children), they do not give out even a sound. Instead, “the sound of dead branches falling from old trees on windless evenings” is heard and “random holes [appear] in front lawns, dark sockets where clods of earth have been removed during the night.” (Tan, 2008: 68) The image clearly indicates that these stick figures are metonymically conceptualized as the land. Although they do not utter a sound, their silence is enduring and renovative, while their very presence is made possible by the holes left in the lawns as the stick figures fix their heads in preparation of facing yet another daily encounter with aggressive suburban children.

Tan acknowledges that the story relates to his feelings about rapid clearing of the bush-land, which has dwindled with the advance of industrialization and urbanization – he laments the general lack of empathy with the natural landscape which is treated as if it had never even existed by what he calls “an amnesiac culture.” (Tan, n.d.) There is, however, another dimension implicit in the story. The stick figures function as a mirror
image of the inhabitants of suburbia. The boys who beat them out of some unexplained rage find the beatings amusing; however, they also start wondering "What are they? Why are they here? What do they want?" (Tan, 2008: 67). The story concludes with a reflection on these questions:

 [...] if you stop and stare at them for a long time, you can imagine that they too might be searching for answers, for some kind of meaning. It's as if they take all our questions and offer them straight back: Who are you? Why are you here? What do you want? (Tan, 2008: 69)

The mirror one can imagine standing between stick figures and “ordinary” people alludes inevitably to Foucault’s heterotopias and the idea that the mirror exemplifies both the perfect utopia and the perfect heterotopia, as it “does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy” (Foucault, 1986: 24). This in turn again links heterotopia with the fantastic hole, the heads of stick figures literally being holes in the ground. But the inexplicable anger towards one’s mirror image and the unpressed violence also reveal colonial anxiety – the fear that breeds anger in those people who have occupied the land and cleared the bush, the fear that is frequently expressed as a sense of haunting, which is indeed what the stick figures seemingly do.

In this context, stick figures become metaphors for the Australian Aborigines, whom the story itself thus makes visible and inseparable from the experience of daily living. In an article published the same year as Tales from Outer Suburbia, Toby Davidson discusses the poetry of Judith Wright, one of the first Australian authors to direct the public attention towards the long suppression of the Aborigines, who have always been regarded – and, moreover, constructed – by non-Indigenous settlers as embodiments of the haunting silence that spreads over the continent. Such haunting silence has frequently found a proper form in ghost stories, and “Stick Figures” can easily be classified as one.\footnote{Tan’s story bears quite a lot of resemblance to some of Judith Wright’s poetry, for example, “Nigger’s Leap: New England,” in which the below quoted lines evoke the same identification (“ourselves writ strange”) that also exists in “Stick Figures” and the same idea of the silent, hidden, and unnameable (“the night that tidied up the cliffs”):}

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Tan’s story is in Davidson’s Jungian reading “the non-Indigenous ego’s fear of its other [...] projected onto the Indigenous other to distance the Jungian shadow while imposing upon the Indigenous other attributes of an (unbearable) screen — passive, two-dimensional, temporal, dependent, inanimate, Cartesian, silent, blank.” (Davidson, 2008: 8) Depicted as mere shadows, Tan’s stick figures are literally two-dimensional; they passively accept the beatings from suburban children; they are animate only insofar as they are identified with the land, and their silence and blankness is, as discussed above, already implicit in their status of fantastic creatures. Without delving further into Jungian psychoanalysis, we might here at least wonder if the effect produced by Tan’s leaving out any explicit references to his stick figures as Indigenous people is not that of haunting, leaving the reader participant in ‘amnesiac culture’ to wonder what it is precisely that is hidden in the holes of suburban houses and lawns.

Beyond outer suburbia

The answer offered by the two presented stories transcends any oversimplified consideration of Tales from Outer Suburbia as funny fantasies or children’s fiction. As this article has outlined, Tales provide a re-evaluation of suburbia and thus pose a challenge to the tradition of ‘anti-suburbanism’ in Australian culture. In terms of narration, this is achieved by endowing the suburbs with elements of the fantastic. Presenting suburbia as a space filled with the potential for the fantastic, Tales deny its accepted ordinariness and dullness, while they also subvert the established polarized views of spatiality in the context of Australian cultural studies, within which the bush and the city were throughout the twentieth century considered as the only settings worthy of reference in various cultural texts. This subversion also has broader implications for the fictional portrayal of ‘Australianness’. Along with the re-evaluation of

Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers, and the black dust our crops ate was their dust? O all men are one man at last. We should have known the night that tided up the cliffs and hid them had the same question on its tongue for us. And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange. (Wright, 1953: 23)
suburbia, *Tales* also offer a reconsideration and re-emergence of those groups that have traditionally been excluded from the representations of Australian national character, such as the immigrants and the Australian Aborigines, which the two analyzed stories make clear. Tan’s suburban space therefore functions as a productive site of resistance against the institutionally approved and ideologically shaped norm of cultural representation, and from the suburbs as the space of negotiation between the city and the bush, as well as between everydayness and fantasy, Tan offers the emergence of a new national character, which is inclusive of difference and equally open to various heterogeneous groups, such as – in the two analyzed stories – the immigrants from different parts and the indigenous population.

It is interesting to note that the image of suburbia first started to change in West Australia, possibly because the bush ethos was never as emphasized in the West as it was around Sydney and Melbourne, the cultural centers in the southeastern part of the continent. With this in mind, a further contribution to the re-evaluation of suburbia can be found in the work of yet another author from Perth – Dorothy Hewett, who in the 1975 collection of poems titled *Rapunzel in Suburbia* offers, again through spatial contextualization, another fresh view on the cultural representation of Australian identities, focused on the experience of women. Hewett’s poems are certainly relevant for some further research in the given theoretical framework; what is also left open for future examination is the didactic purpose implicit in the presented reconsidereations of suburban spaces. This refers to Tan’s *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, as well as his other publications, including the mentioned *Rabbits* and *The Arrival*. While Tan’s stories unquestionably tackle important issues, the allure they hold for children should not be overlooked, and neither should their popularity. These two combined might finally contribute to a wider dissemination and acceptance of the new concept of Australianness – as proposed by Tan, as a heterogeneous mixture of different identities.

**References**

THE FANTASY OF OUTER SUBURBIA AND NEW REPRESENTATIONS OF AUSTRALIANNESS


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