

Martin Dines. *Gay Suburban Narratives in American and British Culture: Homecoming Queens*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 216 pp.

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In many British and American texts, whether on screen or in print, suburbia has most often come to stand for the oppressive, heteronormative and blandly conformist: quite simply “the straightest space imaginable.” (1) The suburb becomes a false idyll, instilling in their inhabitants an urgent desire for escape. In gay narratives, particularly the coming out story, this wish to leave the suburbs for the lights of the metropolis is compounded in the familiar suburban-to-urban trajectory, in which the emerging gay individual relocates to the city, and in doing so is able, finally, to form a coherent self-identity. The persistent location of realised gay identity in the urban setting in particular recalls John D’Emilio’s essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity” (1983), in which D’Emilio contends that homosexual identity (as distinct from homosexual *behaviour*) emerged once men and women were able to live beyond the nuclear family under the conditions of capitalism.

In *Gay Suburban Narratives in American and British Culture*, Martin Dines contests this simplistic demarcation of the suburbs as nothing more than the inevitable starting point on the road to a fully realised, fully accepted gay identity. Instead, Dines explores the crucial part the suburbs have played in the gay imagination. He initiates a re-reading of several coming out stories—amongst them Frank DeCaro’s *A Boy Named Phyllis* and Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story*—in a bid to highlight the importance of the suburban setting, even as it becomes obscured by the urban relocation that marks the denouement of these stories. Suburbia, Dines contends, is central to the coming out story, not only as the place escaped from, but as the place where readers may well be situated. Suburbia’s ability to function as the landscape of the everyman allows for the inclusion of the adolescent reader, for whom the narratives, featuring the eventual successful accession to the metropolis, provide reassurance.

This relationship between the adolescent and the suburban landscape is a key facet of

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Dines' analysis. Often overlooked or rendered inferior in favour of portrayals of gay adulthood, here the gay (or more accurately for Dines, the “not-yet-gay”) adolescent is reclaimed. The coming out stories Dines examines dwell on the suburban past as the impetus for the urban present, a past in which the figure of the childhood “sissy” is rooted:

The typical trajectory of the coming-out story, characterized by the evacuation of the suburbs for the city and the corresponding transition from shameful or abject effeminacy to a proud, viable gay identity, appears to jettison the sissy, abandoning him in suburbs of the past. (72)

Whilst mindful of the dangers of assuming a causal link between the childhood sissy and the adult gay man, Dines highlights the contradictory nature of these coming out stories, which simultaneously “divorce the sissy from gay identity” (72) in their careful binary distinctions (suburban/urban, adolescent/adult) while at the same time recuperating the sissy as a “proto-gay hero” (41), thus effecting a reclamation of queer childhood by the gay adult.

Elsewhere, Dines continues this theme of contradiction that characterises the relationship between suburbia and gay male identity. He explores the differences between British and American texts, providing a nuanced analysis that highlights the emphasis on tolerance and heterosexual acceptance sought in British texts, against an American tendency towards flight to the metropolis.

Suburbia, far from being a site of homogeneous passivity, is revealed to be a complex space open to multiple interpretations. Dines explores New Narrative techniques, focusing on the works of Dennis Cooper and Kevin Killian, in which a postmodern approach renders the emptiness of suburbia beneficial, a “blank canvas” (119) that speaks to possibility and the potential for authenticity, rather than stifling constraint. Yet for gay conservatives suburbia comes to symbolise assimilation, a respectable alternative to urban gay subcultures. Dines interrogates this image of suburbia as the supposed site of the “silent majority” (145), suggesting that a return to suburbia indicates not maturity but regression, a return to the space of desexualised adolescence.

Throughout the text, the persistent tension between suburbia as a place of subversion or assimilation remains. Dines appears critical of the gay conservative view of suburbia, suggesting that their desire to illuminate this “silent majority” acts simply to replace one stereotype (the hedonistic, urban gay man) with another (the domesticated, monogamous gay man). However, in exploring these multifarious interpretations of the suburbs in gay cultural

narratives, Dines reveals the depth of meaning *within* suburbia, far beyond the simplistic notion of the suburbs as a place that simply comes “before” the realisation of gay identity.

*Gay Suburban Narratives in American and British Culture* is an engaging and thorough consideration of the significant role suburbia has to play in post-war gay narratives and the formulation of gay identity. Dines rejects the designation of the suburbs as simply an oppressive space to be escaped, a holding place until the urban relocation can be realised. Instead, he opens up a space in which various—and often contradictory—experiences of the suburban environment can be considered.