

The Challenges of Urban Domesticity in American Poetry

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Definitions of Urban, Suburban, and Rural Areas in US

- Under the new definitions (2020), 12% of the population lives in urban areas, **69% in suburban areas**, and 19% in rural areas—the US has been a predominantly suburban nation with increased racial and ethnic diversity in suburbia from 1970 onwards

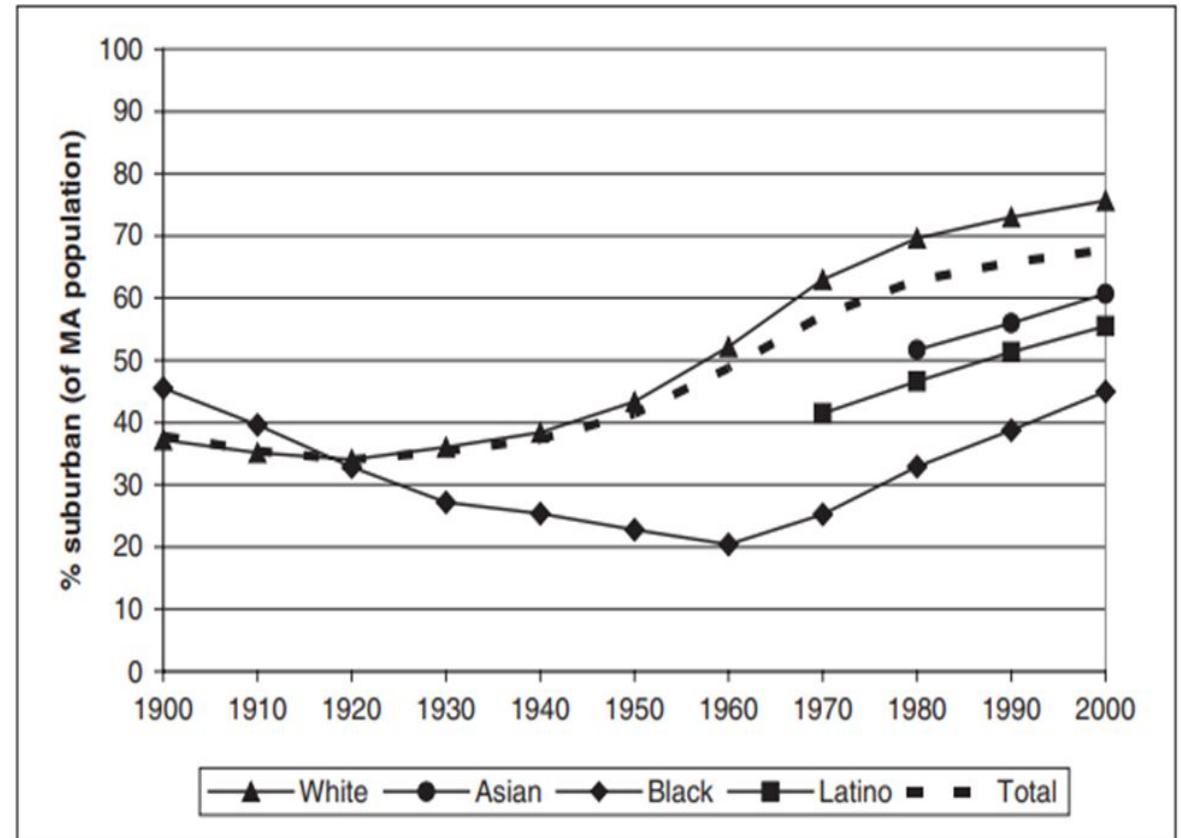


Figure 1. Percentage of U.S. metropolitan area population in suburbs, 1900 to 2000, by racial/ethnic group

Data prior to 1970 are from U.S. Bureau of the Census (1963). Whites and Blacks include Latinos, and the “total” line refers to Whites and Blacks only. Data from 1970 to 2000 are from authors’ calculations from data from the Neighborhood Change Database (GeoLytics 2003). The White, Black, and Asian lines do not include Latinos, who are of all races, and the “total” line includes the Whites, Blacks, and Latinos in 1970 and all four groups from 1980 to 2000.

Suburban Domesticity and Suburban Ideal

- Suburban domesticity refers to the lifestyle and cultural norms associated with living in suburban areas, particularly as they relate to home life and family dynamics. This concept encompasses various aspects of daily living, social structures, and the idealized vision of family.
- The suburban ideal focuses on the family-centered lifestyle that is about “finding a homogenous community of like-minded people, about living in a home that provides comfort and diversion, and [...] about finding an environment in which family ties can be strengthened.” Laura J. Miller

Two Views on Suburban Domesticity, Female Version

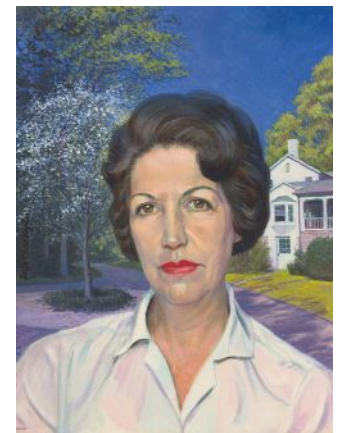
The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction [...] Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—“Is this all?”

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 11 (1963)



“I have lived in the country. I have lived in the city. I have lived in an average Middle Western small town. But for the best fifteen years of my life I have lived in Suburbia, and I like it.”

Phyllis McGinley, from “Suburbia, Of Thee I Sing” (1949)



Phyllis McGinley, "Occupation: Housewife," (1940s)

Her health is good. She owns to forty-one,
Keeps her hair bright by vegetable rinses,
Has two well-nourished children—daughter and son—
Just now away at school. Her house, with chintzes
Expensively curtained, animates the caller.
And she is fond of Early American glass
Stacked in an English breakfront somewhat taller
Than her best friend's Last year she took a class
In modern drama at the County Center.
Twice, on Good Friday, she's heard Parsifal sung.
She often says she might have been a painter,
Or maybe writer; but she married young.
She diets. And with Contract she delays
The encroaching desolation of her days.



Suburban Domesticity, Male Version



BILLY COLLINS

OSSO BUCO

I love the sound of the bone against the plate
and the fortress-like look of it
lying before me in a moat of risotto,
the meat soft as the leg of an angel
who has lived a purely airborne existence.
And best of all, the secret marrow,
the invaded privacy of the animal
prised out with a knife and swallowed down
with cold, exhilarating wine.

I am swaying now in the hour after dinner,
a citizen tilted back on his chair,
a creature with a full stomach—
something you don't hear much about in poetry,
that sanctuary of hunger and deprivation.
You know: the driving rain, the boots by the door,
small birds searching for berries in winter.

But tonight the lion of contentment
has placed a warm, heavy paw on my chest,
and I can only close my eyes and listen
to the drums of woe throbbing in the distance
and the sound of my wife's laughter
on the telephone in the next room,
the woman who cooked the savory osso buco,
who pointed to show the butcher the ones she
wanted.

She who talks to her faraway friend
while I linger here at the table
with a hot, companionable cup of tea,
feeling like one of the friendly natives,
a reliable guide, maybe even the chief's favorite son.



BILLY COLLINS

Somewhere, a man is crawling up a rocky hillside
on bleeding knees and palms, an Irish penitent
carrying the stone of the world in his stomach;
and elsewhere people of all nations stare
at one another across a long, empty table.

But here, the candles give off their warm glow,
the light that Shakespeare and Izaak Walton wrote by,
the light that lit and shadowed the faces of history.
Only now it plays on the blue plates,
the crumpled napkins, the crossed knife and fork.

In a while, one of us will go up to bed
and the other one will follow.
Then we will slip below the surface of the night
into miles of water, drifting down and down
to the dark, soundless bottom
until the weight of dreams pulls us lower still,
below the shale and layered rock,
beneath the strata of hunger and pleasure,
into the broken bones of the earth itself,
into the marrow of the only place we know.

Suburban Domesticity, Male Version

On the Road

BY JOHN UPDIKE

Those dutiful dogtrots down airport corridors
while gnawing at a Dunkin' Donuts cruller,
those hotel rooms where the TV remote
waits by the bed like a suicide pistol,
those hours in the air amid white shirts
whose wearers sleep-read through thick staid thrillers,
those breakfast buffets in prairie Marriotts—
such venues of transit grow dearer than home.

The tricycle in the hall, the wife's hasty kiss,
the dripping faucet and uncut lawn—this is life?
No, *vita* thrives via the road, in the laptop
whose silky screen shimmers like a dark queen's mirror,
in the polished shoe that signifies killer intent,
and in the solitary mission, a bumpy glide
down through the cloud cover to a single runway
at whose end a man just like you guards the Grail.

Jean E. Moore: “We Bought a House Last Year,” 1950s

We bought a house last year—
Amidst “the murmuring pine and hemlock,”
The flowering dogwoods, the spreading yew,
The roses, chrysanthemums, blueberries, too.

We bought a house last year—
After looking at many,
Hearing “No’s” loud and fierce,
After mortgage refusals
Pleadings “Money’s too scarce” —
Or, just, “We don’t want you,”
Or other things worse.



Moore, “We Bought a House...” (cont.)

We moved *in* last year—
Amidst moving van’s rumbles and usual clutter
And telephone wiring, utility men’s mutter.
Amidst silent still neighbors
Except one tousled blond head
Whose tricycle trod, where his parents would dread!
Then, shouts from a distance—
“Don’t go over there!”
The obvious enmity—
Borne out of fear!
“Don’t walk on my land!” “Don’t speak!”
What building on sand! *Who* is mighty? Who, weak?

We bought a house last year—
Despite friction and fear.
We know we’re not wanted
Except by a few
Who have courage to stand
On convictions felt true

But this house was our choice,
A home was our goal.
We had no intention of
Mortgaging our soul.

So, my child will stand
straight
And firm, on his sod,
With courage, conviction
And faith, in our God!



Ashley M. Jones: “Redlining” (2019)

Oh, what? You thought I didn't belong here?
You thought your street was me-proof? Thought here
was a place only lilies could grow? Can you hear
my skin before you see it? Can you hear
the rap I'm blasting down your perfect street? Here,
take it—every beat will fight for me. **If you can hear
it, that means I'm winning, that means you can't hurt me here.
Means I'm belonging if it's the last thing I do. Did you hear
the one about the black girl who just wanted to mind her
own business in a country, state, city, suburb where
their only business is making sure I'm not here?
Where my face my body my God my hair
even my right to write this sonnet right here
is policed, is stared down, is burned fast as ether.**



Claudia Rankine (b. 1963): from *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)

The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients. You walk down a path bordered on both sides with deer grass and rosemary to the gate, which turns out to be locked.



At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?

It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry.

I am so sorry, so, so sorry.

Summary:

Female Domesticity in Suburban Poetry:

- focus on family (and community) cohesion
- critique of suburban routine, sacrifice of a professional/creative career (the problem that has no name) as stifling for women
- celebration/criticism of traditional domesticity based on women accepting the roles of stay-at-home mothers and housewives

Male Domesticity in Suburban Poetry:

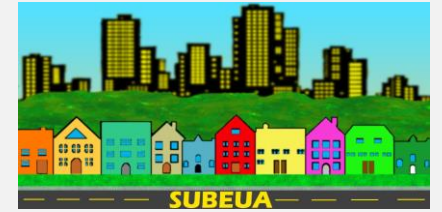
- focus on discussing the social status of being male and suburban
- celebration of suburban materialism, consumerism, domestic bliss (or its lack)
- criticism of suburban ennui
- focus on being outsider to the suburban lifestyle being portrayed

Sustainable Suburban Identities in the Future

- will have to reflect the challenges of female/male suburban domesticity and racial exclusion
- issues of privacy vs community involvement
- issues of car-driving culture vs a recent trend toward walkable urban and suburban communities (eg Scarsdale, NY, Falls Church, VA, Lakewood, OH,)



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