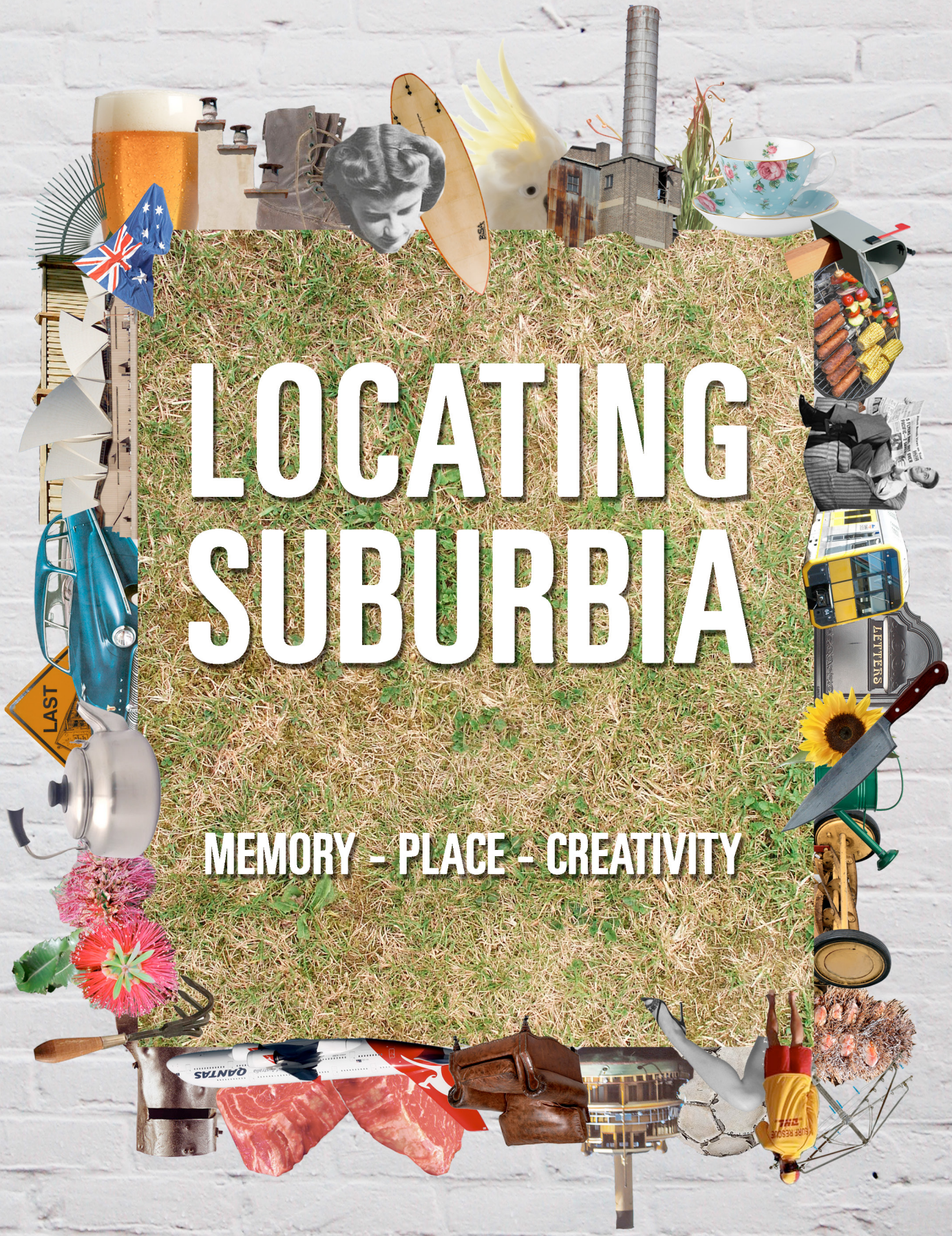

LOCATING SUBURBIA

MEMORY - PLACE - CREATIVITY

EDITED BY

PAULA HAMILTON & PAUL ASHTON

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Edited by

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton

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INTRODUCTION

THE POLITICS AND PASSIONS OF THE SUBURBAN OASIS

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton

> Murder in the suburbs isn't murder technically at all really is it? It's a justifiable reaction to aesthetic deprivation and golf.[1]

Suburbia has been satirised and mocked by the best of them from George Orwell's 1939 caricature in *Coming up for Air* to Dame Edna Everidge from the 1960s and TV's Kath and Kim in twentieth-first century Australia. For many of the generation growing up in the twentieth century, suburbia is, on the one hand, the remembered nightmare from which the human chrysallis escaped to experience adulthood and its pleasures *elsewhere* – the stifling, conformist sameness which nonetheless hid evil deeds like murder. Others hold dear the wistful nostalgic memories about growing up in a domesticated cosy world of backyard games so effectively mobilised by conservative Prime Minister John Howard during the 1990s in relation to Earlwood, a suburb of Sydney.[2]

It is certainly the case that for the older generation who lived through depression and war in the twentieth century, the suburbs represented safety and peace – 'a roof over our heads'; 'a place to call our own'. Like the soldier who came back from Changi POW camp, kissed the ground at Narrabeen, a suburb in Sydney, and said: 'this'll do me'!, the expanding suburbs after the 1950s were the retreat for many men after

time abroad in global conflict; a place to replenish the spirit and build again – individual lives, families, homes, garages, sheds, gardens, lawns. Suburbs have also been long hated,[3] and more recently loved,[4] by writers and intellectuals. They have also been perceived with an uneasy ambiguity, as 'being neither town nor country, but an unwilling combination of both, and either neat and shining, or cheap and nasty, according to the incomes of its inhabitants'.[5] This was the 'half world between city and country in which most Australians lived' that architect Robin Boyd decried in his elitist work on Australia domestic architecture.[6] Recently, however, there has been a strong and growing interest in delineating the complexities of the suburban experience rather than simply denouncing or defending it.

Over the last twenty to thirty years, suburbia has had a make-over. How it is remembered and what place it has had in our lives has also being reconfigured. Many now accept that the nostalgia relates only to a childhood dream of the white Anglo-Saxon part of the population that obscured a great deal more than it revealed. Certainly the historian Andrew May argued in 2009 that 'the reliance of the twin fictions of the novelist's pen and of baby-boomer nostalgia for our predominant images of post-war suburban history precludes the prospect of developing more sophisticated historical narratives'.[7] Even before the impact of the massive post-war migration, the suburbs were more culturally and socially diverse than we have previously understood. Class and religious divisions, if not always race and ethnicity, have a long history within suburban communities.[8] Nowadays, the articulation of that nostalgic memory in public forums is strongly contested, as suburban places are made and remade over time.

In March 2013, for example, Peter Roberts wrote a column for the *Sydney Morning Herald* which had the heading: 'What happened to the suburb I used to know? His particular suburb was Greenacre near Lakemba in Sydney and his article juxtaposed a suburban past and present. He remembers a suburb where he grew up during the late 1950s and early 1960s as a place of peace, sparsely populated, filled with boys sports and games:

> Lakemba? Sure that's where we went to the Sunday matinee at the Odeon every week and watched such pearls as the Three Stooges, Jerry Lewis and Ben-Hur.

Roberts does not mention that Lakemba is now the site of a mosque and one of the biggest Muslim communities in Australia. But most of the *Herald* readers will have this in mind. In his (Anglo-Saxon) memory, there was no violence as there is now, which he blames on the 'enclave of Little Lebanon'. Greenacre and Lakemba now, he says, have been 'turned into a minefield, or a battlefield, or a refuge

of drug dealers, criminals, drive-by shooters and terror'. His elegaic tone is one of sadness and loss:

> That was my home – the place where I once simply couldn't imagine living anywhere else – transformed to the place where I could never imagine living again.

There were several responses to this letter which seemed to strike a Sydney nerve and gave readers a sense of how the media mediates our collective memories. At least two letters accused Roberts of cloaking racism in nostalgia. Omar Sakr replied in the same edition of the *Herald* with an awareness about the public prominence of such views and how they need to be interrogated. Sakr is particularly critical of the assumption that all of the problems are the result of another ethnic group, as though murder and rape were not part of any other suburban culture. This view, he says, absolves one group for taking responsibility for the problems of the community as a whole. For him, growing up in this area probably twenty or thirty years later, the most important element was the camaraderie of his diverse delinquent friends.

One letter, though, was from someone who had lived for eighteen months in Lakemba until recently and also spent time there on a regular basis now. Con Vaitsas, now of Ashbury, claimed that Roberts' vision was 'way out of whack with reality' and very outdated. He argued that Greenacre and Lakemba were no longer predominantly the home of the Lebanese but a mixture of very different nationalities living peacefully side by side: 'my neighbours were Filipinos and Colombians on either side and Africans opposite us', he wrote. So his perception was one of a successful multicultural community.

Such an exchange does little to recognise the complexity of current suburban life but it does juxtapose the memories from different generations and cultures against one another as alternative experiences of belonging to particular suburban localities.

What is Suburbia?

Suburbs are geographically defined areas on a map, spatially located in our memories and also an idea: they colonise our imaginations as both inside and outside the pale. But beyond the government defined boundaries, how are they delineated? Are they anything beyond the city central? Inner city areas such as Surry Hills or Balmain are certainly not brought to mind by this term. Spatially the suburbs are seen as 'out there' away from the inner city which somehow don't meet the criteria for single story occupation on a block of land which we think of as characteristically suburban. But where does the inner city begin and end now? Redfern, Waterloo, Alexandria, Drummoyne,

St Leonard's? 'As a state of mind and a way of living', Humphrey McQueen has observed,

> Suburbia is not confined to certain geographic areas but can thrive where there are no suburbs… It is pointless to lay down a criterion for suburbia that includes duplexes, but excludes a row of terraces. Where it survives outside its natural habitat, suburbia still aspires to the ways of living that are most completely realised by nuclear families on garden blocks with detached houses.[9]

The identity of suburbia, so far as it can be ascribed one, is shifting and insecure; a borderline and liminal space.[10] Dominant stereotypes have listed it as 'on the margins' beyond edges of cultural sophistication and tradition' and the areas that make up 'sprawl'.[11] But in the twenty-first century this static view has to be modified somewhat. And it is evident from this collection that suburban dwellers themselves have redefined being cosmopolitan as house prices in the inner suburbs skyrocket and push people further afield.[12]

The study of suburbs is often viewed as separate from the city or the urban as a whole. But in fact not only are suburbs obviously integral; they are now part of the networked city, reinforcing much older electricity grids, transport and water services with contemporary communications networks, especially the internet and mobile telephony which has facilitated greater interaction between suburbs and across the urban generally. Suburbs are always relational in this sense and though we tend to throw a light on the local or the small concerns within the suburb as case studies, this collection does not argue for their isolation from the wider urban landscape, for we know that local knowledge too, has the power to change lives.

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This collection was set up as a collaborative project by members of the Research Strength in Creative Practices and Cultural Economy at the University of Technology, Sydney, is in the first instance a testament to that range and complexity of twenty-first century responses to city suburbs, predominantly in Sydney, though with a nod to other suburban contexts on the most-populated eastern seaboard of Australia, such as Melbourne and Brisbane. Secondly, the collection showcases the lively engagement and interdisciplinary nature of the intellectual culture in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Technology, Sydney, from the more traditional scholarly approaches of Humanities scholars to the range of cultural forms which make up Creative Practice in the academy, especially in this

case, Creative Writing and Media Arts.[13] We had many seminars and discussions which took place in 2011 and 2012 about the ideas for the collection. We began by viewing it from the perspective of lived experience, always believing it possible that new technologies can create different spaces for collaborative scholarship within the traditional frame of a book.

And so it proved. We found that the tension between representing how a world was experienced while keeping that detached critical eye on its form and nature could work very well through a range of artistic and scholarly practice that spoke to each other. Karen Till, writing about her own engagement with memory studies as an artist, argues that more traditional scholars have a lot to gain by heeding the work of artists 'who also acknowledge the ways that people experience memory as multi-sensual, spatial ways of understanding their worlds'.[14]

Three distinct themes emerged in relation to the central concept of re-imagining the suburban which people researched and made for this publication. As our title indicates these became remembered suburbs anchored either by our own personal past or those of others, suburbs as places that were made and remade across time and suburbs not only as the subject for various creative representations but also increasingly where creativity as an identified practice or industry takes place.[15]

Some of our essays take as their subject particular suburbs such as Bondi, Manly and Campbelltown. Others range across time and the space of the urban and suburban. Others focus on those inner city in-betweens, subject of urban renewal and consolidation, such as Marrickville, Pyrmont and Balmain. Some utilise the concept of the even more local through a focus on the park, shops, the backyard or the suburban house. And still others explore what took place in the homes of these areas there that came to be identified with suburban life.

Referring to the suburbs of England, Roger Silverstone previously commented in his 1997 book *Visions of Suburbia* that 'An understanding of how suburbia was produced and continues to be both produced and reproduced is an essential precondition for an understanding of the twentieth century, an understanding above all of our emerging character and contradictions of our everyday lives'.[16] Whether his argument for the centrality of suburbia to historical understanding still holds for the twenty-first century remains to be seen given the many different shapes it now takes in our imaginations.

MEMORY

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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Debra Adelaide is an author, editor and academic who teaches and supervises in the creative writing program at UTS. She has published twelve books including three novels, the latest of which was *The Household Guide to Dying* (2008). Her next work of fiction, *Letter to George Clooney*, was published in September 2013.

Theresa Dirndorfer Anderson explores the relationship between people, emerging technologies and information practices. She is particularly interested in the interaction between creative and analytic activities. She continues to promote creative practice within that community as the Creativity Chair for the international iSchool Consortium. She is co-editor (with Donald and Spry) of *Youth, Society and Mobile Media in Asia* (2010). Her first installation work, Playing with the Pause – based on her ongoing ethnographic investigation of creative cultures – is part of events in Sydney, Fort Worth, Copenhagen and Berlin taking place in 2013 and 2014.

Paul Ashton is Professor of Public History at the University of Technology, Sydney. He is co-editor of the journal *Public History Review* and Co-Director of the Australian Centre for Public History. A Board Member of the Dictionary of Sydney, his publications included *Australia History Now* (co-edited with Anna Clark) and *History at the Crossroads: Australians and the Past* (with Paula Hamilton).

David Aylward is the Research Manager for Arts and Social Sciences (UTS) and Deputy Director of the UTS Research Strength, Creative Practice and the Cultural Economy. David is also an honorary research fellow in the Faculty of Commerce, University of Wollongong. He is a member of the editorial board for the *International Journal of Business and Management*, Associate Editor for the *International Journal of Business Excellence* and a regular reviewer for ten international journals. David's research interests include organizational structures and domains within the international wine industry, research and development of wine, cultural asset development and the intersection of cultural and economic interests. He is published widely in both scholarly and professional journals.

Kay Donovan is a Research Associate with the Centre for Creative Practice and Cultural Economy, undertaking practice-led research in documentary filmmaking and creative writing. She has an MA (Writing) and DCA (Communications – Media Arts and Practice) from the University of Technology, Sydney. She is also a documentary filmmaker (*Tagged* 2006) and the author of *Bush Oranges* (2001).

Paula Hamilton is Professor of History at the University of Technology, Sydney. She has been a practitioner of oral history for 30 years and has worked in a range of projects with community groups, museums, heritage agencies and local councils. She is also the co-director of the Australian Centre for Public History and has published widely in public history, oral history and memory studies. Her most recent publications are *Places of the Heart: Memorials in Australia* (with Paul Ashton and Rose Searby, 2012), *History at the Crossroads: Australians and the Past* (with Paul Ashton, 2010) and *Oral History and Public Memories* (co-edited with Linda Shopes, 2009).

Megan Heyward is a media artist who works at the intersection of narrative and new technologies. Her electronic literature works – *I Am A Singer* and *of day, of night* – have been widely exhibited in Australia and internationally, including USA, Canada, France, Germany and Japan. Both projects have been recognized in significant new media awards, including AIMIA Awards and the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature. *Of day, of night* was published by US publisher, Eastgate Systems, in late 2005, and is still being exhibited in electronic literature conferences in the USA, such as ELIT 2012 and MLA 2013. More recently Megan has worked with narrative and locative technologies. Her locative documentary, *Traces: stories written upon this town* was exhibited at the Sydney Opera House, Adelaide Festival Media State and the Centre Pompidou, Paris in 2006-7. Megan's locative artwork, *Notes for Walking*, was exhibited in the Sydney Festival, 2013, drawing several thousand visitors to Middle Head National Park, Sydney, during January 2013.

Sue Joseph has been a journalist for more than thirty years, working in Australia and the UK. She began working as an academic, teaching print journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney in 1997. As Senior Lecturer, she now teaches and supervises into both journalism and creative writing schools, particularly creative non-fiction writing, in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Her research interests are around sexuality, secrets and confession, framed by the media; HIV and women; ethics; trauma; supervision and ethics and life writing; and Australian creative non-fiction. Her third book *Speaking Secrets* was published in 2012.

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