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"While the imagination strains / after deer": William Carlos Williams's Interrogations of the American Transcendental Imagination and the Proto-Suburban Scene

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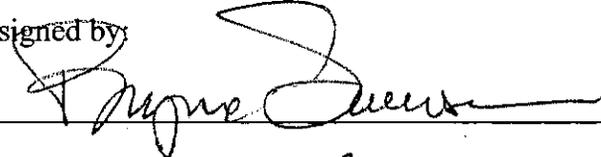
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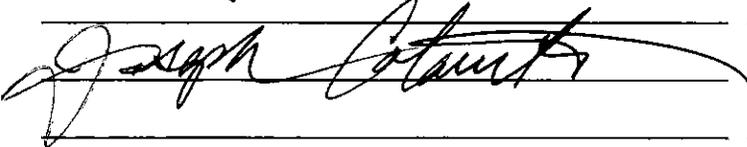
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**“While the imagination strains / after deer”: William Carlos Williams’s
Interrogations of the American Transcendental Imagination and the Proto-
Suburban Scene**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of English

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of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Tyler Jay Wagner

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Introduction

*“Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and sufficient rivers,
Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.”*

Walt Whitman, from “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”

In Walt Whitman’s poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman’s poetic persona marvels at “the simple, compact, well-join’d scheme” (10) into which he—and everyone else—fits, and he meditates on the apparent timelessness of the present moment, a moment in which he speaks to all the future generations: “It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence, / Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt” (11). Whitman, in the midst of this experience of intense futurity (his meditation occurs aboard a technological marvel), is able to celebrate the ever-important present—and its connection to all other moments in time. At least, so he thought.

Just over 50 years after Whitman’s original edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) was published, society, as Whitman predicted, had stretched outward. However, the source of this movement was not the urban expansion Whitman encourages in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” but the rise of American suburbanization. As America approached modernity, suburbanization subsumed the American Romantic attitude toward the landscape and the evacuated rural spaces outside of urban cores to produce a new space for the bourgeois upper class—a phenomenon that both Kenneth T. Jackson and Robert Fishman chronicle in their historical texts on suburbanization. This relocation of the emergent bourgeois

upper class to the outskirts of the city created a new hybridized space for Modernist poets to consider.

Oftentimes the American suburbs are considered through the lens of architecture, economics, fiction, and visual media. And, typically, the conversation centers on their cultural zenith in the 1950s. One literary form is neglected in this conversation: poetry. This omission is peculiar, as a fascination with the vastness of the continent's landscape—and its significance—pervades the history of the American verse. For Ralph Waldo Emerson, the apparently endless expanses of space and rejuvenative qualities of the American landscape provide the poet's ideal inspiration, and Whitman, in perhaps the most important collection of poetry of the nineteenth century, *Leaves of Grass*, is very much concerned with rendering the American experience through the landscape.

In William Carlos Williams's early poetry, Williams often contemplates the significance of the American proto-suburbs of the 1910s and 1920s. While his poems provide insight into the spaces that would eventually become the popular, mass-produced suburbs of the 1950s and beyond, they also enter into a conversation with the American Romantic tradition—to which Whitman's poetry belongs—and with the classical pastoral form, a form that historically idealized the conditions of rural laborers and presented unrealistic depictions of rural spaces. Williams's poetry stands out from that of his Modernist counterparts in that it is able to identify and dismantle the illusion of proto-suburban spaces. That is to say, Williams notices that both the American proto-suburbs and the pastoral ideal rely upon ignoring the material reality of the rural and suburban poor.

Through an analysis of Williams's poetry, the history of the pastoral form, the history of the American suburbs, and contemporary literary criticism, this essay will demonstrate how Williams repurposes the classical pastoral form in order to critique exactly what that form conventionally relies upon: the omission of the rural and suburban poor. In doing so, Williams presents the American proto-suburbs not as an Arcadian space but as a space that makes visible the silencing of poor subjects who reside there. For this reason, Williams perceives that the enameling of nature—that is, the misrecognition of rural and emerging suburban spaces as spaces embodying the unreal pastoral ideal of nature—within the suburbs is problematic and, ultimately, not authentic at all.

William Carlos Williams and the American Pastoral Tradition

“The beauty of nature re-forms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, from *Nature*

Throughout his 1836 book, “Nature,” Ralph Waldo Emerson stresses the American poet's ability to access nature from anywhere, be it the open countryside or the night sky in the city. For Emerson, the apparently endless expanses of space and the rejuvenative qualities of the American landscape provide the poet's ideal inspiration. While Emerson's ideology was essential to the creation of an authentically American poetry, it was also problematized by American suburbanization. That is, the suburbanization of the United States subsumed a few of American transcendentalism's major tenets. In retrospect, it is quite simple to identify how such an appropriation might

occur. In order for the poet to achieve solitude, Emerson necessitates an escape—of some kind—into nature, and he consistently deploys the productive servitude of the American landscape.

Emerson's contemporary and fellow American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* also provides a model for American suburbanization. Beyond reinforcing American transcendentalist sentiments about the relationship between human beings and nature and preaching self-sufficiency, *Walden* presents a compelling economic argument. Thoreau's experiment demonstrates the impossibility of existing outside of the circulation of capital. Even while settling on the periphery, he still must participate in the economy he attempts to escape. Of course, Thoreau did not intend for his model to be replicated—at least not on a mass scale: "I would not have any one adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for . . . I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible" (57). Despite Thoreau's intentions, *Walden* exemplifies the plausibility of settling the periphery: Thoreau did not seek a settlement in the wildness of the open frontier but instead chose the unoccupied space immediately outside of Concord. Mirroring that fact, American society gradually spread outward into the most easily accessible areas of "nature."

Many of William Carlos Williams's fellow suburbanites sought to follow Emerson and Thoreau into the woods for a simpler, more self-satisfying way of living—and to escape the effects of capital in urban areas. In doing so, they contributed to the introduction of a non-farming economy into rural spaces, displacing existing residents and economies, ultimately perverting the natural spaces about which Emerson and Thoreau wrote.

Recently, increased critical attention has been given to Williams's relationship with the pastoral form, beginning with Kinereth Meyer's "William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, and the Cultural Uses of Pastoral" and continuing with John Marsh's "'Thinking/Of the Freezing Poor': The Suburban Counter-Pastoral in William Carlos Williams's Early Poetry" and Maria Farland's "Modernist Versions of Pastoral: Poetic Inspiration, Scientific Expertise, and the 'Degenerate' Farmer." If nothing else, the current critical conversation has moved beyond Rod Townley's assertion, from his 1975 book *The Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, that "the [pastoral] tradition happens to correspond to [Williams's] own modes of thinking and feeling. If pastoral poetry had not existed, Williams would have invented it" (127). Instead, critics now argue that Williams's pastorals are rooted in contradictions—with each other and, more importantly, with the larger pastoral tradition. However, contemporary criticism has so far neglected the relationship between Williams's pastoral poetry and the American literary tradition. To this point, the critical conversation has focused on either Williams's poetry's relationship with the pastoral form or his personal relationship with the American suburbs. Contemporary scholarship has failed to address the intimate connection between Williams's "suburban" poetry and American literary perceptions of nature in the nineteenth century. In Williams's early poetry, he realizes that American proto-suburban spaces have been conflated with conventions of the classical pastoral poem. For this reason, proto-suburban subjects are incapable of comprehending the reality of the space in which they reside.

In this section, I will argue that the American appropriation of the pastoral ideal and imposition of the pastoral tradition onto the American landscape laid the groundwork

for—and eventually necessitated—suburbanization. Because of this phenomenon, Williams simultaneously critiques and repurposes the pastoral form in order to expose the unattractive realities masked by the American pastoral ideal, to portray the suburbs not as an Arcadian space, but instead as a space that—like the classical pastoral—relies on the omission of poor subjects who reside there.

Ironically, literary pastoral sentiments inform the mythology around early American, “Arcadian” rural spaces; therefore, it is important to recognize that the two are not one in the same. Throughout *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx differentiates the American pastoral ideal from classical pastoral design. Marx separates Thomas Jefferson’s idealization of the American landscape from the conventions of the aesthetic form. Similarly, James Machor, in his book *Pastoral Cities*, argues “To become a reality America had to become a state of mind as much as a place, an entity whose identity and existence depended upon its meaning” (27). Part of said identity was the potentiality of establishing pastoral communities. Thus, the vast rural spaces of early America became conflated with classical features of the pastoral poem. America was “a place apart, secluded from the world—a peaceful, lovely, classless, bountiful pasture” (Marx 116). The American landscape existed in contradiction to the “ruins” of feudal Europe. In its uncultivated state, the space became fused with the potentiality of fresh, democratic values.

The American pastoral ideal, like the pastoral form, evolved over time. Thomas Jefferson, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, presents an argument for a pastoral—or agrarian—society, one that balances production and nature, self-sufficiency and societal progress; however, as Marx notes, “as time went on, accordingly, the idea became more

vague, a rhetorical formula rather than a conception of society” (226). Perhaps the most interesting characteristic of Marx’s argument—and the most relevant to this project—is his perception of the positionality of the pastoral ideal; Marx recognizes a breakdown in the previously clear distinction between urban and rural spaces: “For in the stark contrast between city and country each had been assumed to occupy a more or less fixed location in space: the country here, the city there. But in 1844 the sound of a train in the Concord woods implies a radical change in the conventional pattern” (31). The train enters the conversation thanks to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s journal, and it marks the entrance of a new kind of economy into nature. Ultimately, Marx argues that, throughout the nineteenth century, the pastoral ideal “is located in a middle ground somewhere ‘between,’ yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature” (23). In other words, the unreality presented by pastoral poetry became something to strive toward, all while recognizing that the progression of society rested somewhere in between an unattainable pastoral space and the city, that a fusion of the two held the most promise.

This positioning of the Middle Landscape as an “in-between” space, a theoretical space that bridges the gap between the implausibility of the pastoral ideal and urban living, is worth considering alongside the emergence of the American suburbs. Although the purpose of the spaces that would eventually become the suburbs might have changed over time, these spaces were never empty. Before the rise of rural spaces directly outside of urban cores, the suburbs predominantly consisted of lower-class laborers and poor families. The romanticization of this space did not eradicate the inhabitants—at least not immediately. Marsh contends that Williams’s “counter-pastoral” poetry serves as a reminder that the idyllic suburbs are not deprived of struggle, that the perceived Arcadia

is not as perfect as it might appear: “Whereas conventional pastoral poets tended to elide or romanticize rural labor and rural poverty for their court or otherwise affluent readers, Williams will cast a spotlight on the rural poor and working class in all their degraded, despoiled specificity” (99). Many of Williams’s early pastoral poems—“Idyl (They say to me),” “Pastoral (When I was younger),” and “K. McB”—are addressed to a bourgeois upper-class reader and contemplate a scene that has been affected by either struggling subjects or impoverished spaces. The inclusion of these scenes marks a break from the pastoral tradition, one concerned with preserving an inoffensive, idyllic image of rural spaces and subjects. Williams is not only presenting a re-reading of a poetic form but also a reinterpretation of the reading of the American middle landscape. Through his early pastorals, Williams works within the form of American mythology to unmask its mythological qualities.

As Kenneth T. Jackson notes in *Crabgrass Frontier*, at the turn of the twentieth century, most Americans thought that streetcars would spread the lower class into the deep suburbs, as “the marginal cost of transportation did not rise as fast as the price of land fell with distance from the city center” (129). Still, the dominant attitude was that cities would remain the nucleus of society, not that the suburbs would burgeon into independent communities. At the same time, farmers were suffering from an agricultural depression, to which “most farmers responded rationally and eventually sold their land; some to speculators and others to individuals. In either case, the amount of suburban-style real estate increased to meet the demand” (130). Farland further explores the nuances of this phenomenon. Throughout the early twentieth century, the dominant cultural attitude was that rural populations were suffering from widespread mental

deterioration and were therefore inferior to affluent urban and suburban subjects: “No longer was the farmer the quintessential American, from this perspective, but a critical social problem in need of remedy and reform” (Farland 907). The support of various scientists and sociologists only exacerbated this myth; in urban spaces, “farmer” was often used as a pejorative.

The cultural fall of the rural sphere prompted both a wealth of space for suburban development and the simultaneous rethinking of the pastoral, as Modernist pastoral poetry was forced to engage with the denigration of rural living. As farmers relocated, suburbanization subsumed an open, ruined space and resold its potential as the quintessence of the romantic ideal. As Robert Fishman notes in *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, developers essentially sold a pastoral ideality to prospective suburbanites:

Only the periphery was sufficiently undefined to permit innovation . . . In this Darwinian struggle for urban space, the bourgeoisie sought not only land for their commercial and industrial enterprises but also land for their dreams: their visions of the ideal middle-class home. (12-13)

The suburbs that Williams inhabited in the 1910s and 1920s looked nothing like the popular, mass-produced suburbs of the 1950s; the potentiality of the space proved more alluring than the actuality of it. Williams’s neighbors moved to the suburbs in search of an unreality and were able to do so because of their relative economic privilege.

Williams’s pastorals underscore those who are left behind, or even oppressed, by this dominant American mythology. Meyer argues that it is a mistake to write off Williams’s use of pastoral simply as a rejection of the form or excessively literary

language. Meyer's argument pertains chiefly to *Paterson*, Williams's experimental epic; however, it also applies to Williams's early pastorals. Meyer contends that "in writing a 'pastoral' that valorizes the material world of things over a purely fictive world of words that never existed at any time or in any place, Williams rejects pastoral," but he also "simultaneously recreates and *reaffirms* pastoral as the mode of choice for cultural critique" (65). In this way, Williams's "pastorals" defy the traditions of the form, and the dialectic presented by Williams's subversion of the pastoral form infuses these poems with a new energy. Ultimately, Meyer contends that Williams's repurposing of pastoral is the result of Williams's recognition that "poetic language refers not only to the material world, but also to an entire cultural and linguistic tradition in which every poem is a reading of another poem" (68). It is important to recognize that Williams's early pastorals do, as Marsh argues, enter into conversation with the space he inhabited at the time: Rutherford, New Jersey. Williams's renovation of the pastoral form was, at least partially, an attempt to gain the attention of the bourgeois upper-class suburbanites in his own town of residence.

Enter chicken wire and ashes, "furniture gone wrong," and rows of "houses / of the very poor" (Williams 64). The inhabitants are mostly gone, leaving the space susceptible to the imaginative appropriation of any passerby—or any poet. The persona in Williams's poem, "Pastoral (When I was younger)," from his 1917 collection *Al Que Quiere!*, does just that. The title of Williams's poem prepares his reader for a conventionally idyllic landscape—and after reading the first three lines of the poem, nothing unusual seems to be happening: "When I was younger / it was plain to me / I must make something of myself" (64). Williams appears to have written a classic

American pastoral poem. The surprise then manifests when the reader is presented with an entirely different landscape, one boasting cluttered yards and outhouses “built of barrel-staves and parts of boxes” (64). Williams’s poem portrays a new space, one of the burgeoning American suburbs.

Instead of describing the living arrangements of affluent suburbanites, Williams underscores a scene neglected by the bourgeois upper class residing in the suburbs, one of the abject struggle of the suburban poor. Instead of enjoying a moment of self-actualization through an organic experience with the natural world, the persona realizes that no one else is interested in the realities of this down-on-its-luck space: “No one / will believe this / of vast import to the nation” (65). Instead of presenting a conventional American pastoral poem, Williams subverts the expectations of his readership. In order to bring visibility to the neglected subjects and spaces, the poem’s persona walks “back streets / admiring the houses / of the very poor” (64).

The main problem Williams attempts to underscore in “Pastoral (When I was younger)” is that the introduction of a non-farming economy into nature—which parallels the rise of the proto-suburbs—relies not only on the exploitation of the American landscape but also on the exploitation and silencing of the suburban poor. For this reason, the opening lines of Williams’s poem are of the utmost importance: “When I was younger / it was plain to me / I must make something of myself” (64). Here, Williams’s persona essentially distills the mindset of the classical pastoral subject. The persona realizes that the impulse to make something of himself comes at the expense of something else: the scene presented by the poem. His coming of age allows him to recognize the problematic nature of the suburban space and the pastoral form. Although

the final conceit of the poem—“No one / will believe this / of vast import to the nation” (65)—feels more like a whimper than a triumphant proclamation, the poem itself presents an incisive critique of both the willful ignorance of Williams’s suburban neighbors and the pastoral and American poetic traditions to which the poem responds.

In “Pastoral (When I was younger),” Williams’s persona recognizes that developing suburban spaces do not allow all of their subjects contact with the conception of nature presented throughout the pastoral tradition. Beyond that, he realizes that the classic American interpretation of nature has come from a position of privilege. The poem gives voice to what both the pastoral form and early American suburbanization silence. That is, Williams’s poem includes the reality of the suburban space instead of a serene, but false, portrayal of the natural world. Williams understands that the diametric opposition between his “Pastoral (When I was younger)” and the conventional pastoral poem deprives the conventional pastoral of its primary affect. Of course, it is also possible to read “Pastoral (When I was younger)” as supplanting the fetishization of an idealized version of nature with the fetishization of the struggling suburban poor.

If we read Williams’s persona as an entitled, bourgeois upper-class voyeur, overlooking the fact that less fortunate people have to live in this space and instead enjoying the bluish-green hue that “pleases [him] best / of all colors” (64), then “Pastoral (When I was younger)” is as disappointing as a conventional pastoral, and Williams is no different from the neighbors whom Marsh argues he criticizes. This problematic reading plays out in Peter Schmidt’s essay “Some Versions of Modernist Pastoral: Williams and the Precisionists.” Schmidt argues that the persona in “Pastoral (When I was younger)” observes the harmony of nature in this scene of decay: “The unity Williams discovers is

‘weathered,’ open to nature’s changes, and ‘proper,’ implying an aesthetic of the natural” (397). Schmidt’s analysis matches that of Williams’s neighbors, which is exactly what the poem attempts to work against. So why does the text welcome such an interpretation? As Zachariah Pickard points out in his essay “William Carlos Williams, Description, and the Avant-Garde,” the images in Williams’s poem attempt to maintain complete objectivity: “However novel the mood may be, the mechanics of its transmission—through the description of objects less interesting for themselves than for what they evoke in the speaker—are familiar” (88). It is not the objects in the poem but the persona’s reaction to them that evokes an emotional response from the reader. For this reason, “Pastoral (When I was younger)” can present itself as problematic; Williams manufactures the emotional connection between the persona and his reader. In the pastoral tradition, the space—although not the usual pastoral space—is romanticized, and the reader, along with the persona, experiences the surprising beauties of this scene without recognizing the abject economic depression. However, this manufactured discomfort is the primary affect of Williams’s poem. Williams tricks his reader into siding with the persona before revealing, in the final three lines, the real problem: “No one / will believe this / of vast import to the nation” (64). Because of the mythology of the suburban space, the suburban poor are left behind. The poem presents a complicated survey of an exploited suburban space in order to reorient his neighbors, the bourgeois upper class of Rutherford, New Jersey.

Williams’s skepticism—and subversion—of existing poetic modes is not exclusive to “Pastoral (When I was younger).” It pervades his early work. In “The Farmer,” from Williams’s 1923 collection *Spring and All*, the persona demonstrates

Williams's acute understanding of pastoral conventions, as "the artist figure of / the farmer" (186) stands by the roadside. Throughout the poem, Williams's persona underscores the dissonance between the pastoral idealization of the farmer and the plight of contemporary farmers; the farmer's fields are blank, his orchard is black and decaying.

Similarly, in Williams's poem "Idyl (They say to me)," published in 1914, the persona recognizes the plight of "two unfortunates / cowering in the wind" (48) rather than romanticizing them as pastoral figures. Williams's "Idyl (They say to me)" is in no way idyllic. Although the politics presented in the poem are not, perhaps, as radical as "Pastoral (When I was younger)," Williams again underscores the relationship between the affluent and the abject in suburban spaces, as the concept of the poem relies on the parallel conditions of the two unfortunates and the persona of the poem. While the suburban poor endure the inclement weather, the persona is forced to endure the pain that coincides with moving "over / Into the cold sheets" (49). Instead of even gesturing to help the two unfortunates, the persona translates their experience—their suffering—into his own material situation. This appropriation, Williams suggests, is the epitome of the suburban experience. The poem develops an oppositional relationship between the suburban poor and the bourgeois suburbanites in that the happiness of the bourgeois upper class, he argues, is reliant upon the suffering of the suburban poor:

. . . thinking

Of the freezing poor

I consider myself

Happy—

Then we kiss. (49)

It is fitting that Williams's poem ends with a kiss between the persona and his wife, effectively consummating the relationship between the persona and the poor that has been established.

In the end, Williams's early pastoral poems further Marx's evaluation of the Middle Landscape—that is, they demonstrate the extent to which the pastoral ideal can be achieved and at what cost the pastoral experience comes. Williams's willingness to include the suburban poor in his early poetry is characteristic of the Modernist goal to widen poetry's scope and to renew existing forms such as the pastoral. Whereas American Romantic poetry and the pastoral form historically fetishized and elevated the conditions of rural laborers, Williams's poetry highlights the real economic issues that inhabited the proto-suburbs. Whether Williams approaches suburban problems cheekily, as he does in "Pastoral (When I was younger)," or simply questions conventional pastoral figures, as he does in "The Farmer" and "Idyl (They say to me)," he consistently interrogates inherited ideas and perceptions of the suburban landscape.

Where Pastoral Meets the Suburbs

"There was a gold-dust in the air, no doubt—which would have been again an element of glamour if it had not rather lighted the scene with too crude a confidence."

Henry James, from *The American Scene*

In the opening chapter of *The American Scene*, Henry James documents his travels and findings in the countryside of New Jersey and New England. Quite literally, James' observations are of these respective landscapes; however, James is acutely concerned with New York and with how the dominant metropolis—and capital—will

affect and eventually subsume all surrounding spaces. For James, this phenomenon is inevitable; it is the impending “great adventure of a society reaching out into the apparent void for the amenities, the consummations, after having earnestly gathered in so many of the preparations and necessities” (12). What James finds throughout his time in the country is the potentiality of a space that has been essentially emptied; he recognizes that the construction of “nature” relies upon the removal of the rural poor. *The American Scene* reveals the progressive infringement of capital upon these spaces.

As Robert Fishman explains in his book *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, the early suburban family was not a representative American family. It was the bourgeois upper-class family, and only the bourgeois upper-class family, that could first afford the move to the periphery: “From its origins, the suburban world of leisure, family life, and union with nature was based on the principle of exclusion” (Fishman 4). This phenomenon, as Joshua Schuster notes in “William Carlos Williams, Spring and All, and the Anthropological Imaginary,” resulted at least partially from the economic unease of the bourgeois upper class: “The flow of capital into the megalopolis necessitated an increasing flow of peoples, stirring the bourgeoisie’s anxieties of being swallowed up by the swelling populations” (118). As a consequence, many bourgeois upper-class subjects retreated to the periphery.

James immerses his reader in what was engendered by this reorganization of society. His initial reaction to the development of the proto-suburbs focuses on the lavish nature of the newly erected housing: “Here was the expensive as a power by itself, a power unguided, undirected, practically unapplied, really exerting itself in a void that could make it no response, that had nothing—poor gentle, patient, rueful, but altogether

helpless, void!—to offer in return” (James 9). The power of the expensive intermingled with the power of American mythology to contrive a space that offered a void as the zenith of potential.

In *The American Scene*, James—like William Carlos Williams—is interested in the connection between subjects and the spaces inhabited by them. And what James notices in New Jersey and New Hampshire, roughly a decade before Williams notices something similar in his hometown of Rutherford, New Jersey, is the introduction of a new, non-farming economy into nature:

It was a clew, at any rate, in the maze of contemplation, for this vision of the relation so established, the disinherited, the impracticable land throwing itself, as for a finer argument, on the non-rural, the intensely urban class, and the class in question throwing itself upon the land for reasons of its own (21)

And, like Williams, James recognizes that this transaction is a sham, that the idealization of nature—and the apparent endless expanses of wilderness—disfigures the realities of the space. These proto-suburbs appear to be idyllic, but this idyll is manufactured or somehow falsified, “as if the higher finish, even at the hand of nature, were in some sort a perversion . . . from their not bearing the burden of too much history” (14). Thus, early Modernist pastoral poetry became concerned with a manufactured “organic” space, a world that emerged from a confluence of nature and society.

The critical conversation surrounding Williams’s relationship with the suburbs has flourished over the past decade, beginning with John Marsh’s “‘Thinking/Of the Freezing Poor’: The Suburban Counter-Pastoral in William Carlos Williams’s Early

Poetry” in 2007 and resuming, most recently, with Peter Monacell’s “In the American Grid: Modern Poetry and the Suburbs” in 2011. This critical conversation has flourished for a couple of simple reasons. First, Williams is the only canonical Modernist poet who writes about the suburbs while also residing in the suburbs. Second, his suburban poems at times appear to contradict each other. He writes both fairly conventional pastorals and counter-pastorals, such as “Pastoral (When I was younger)” and “To Elsie,” which are directed at the bourgeois elite of Rutherford, New Jersey—Williams’s neighbors who are incapable of recognizing that Rutherford is not an Arcadian space.

Although Williams—amongst other Modernists—proclaims a poetics of renewal and re-creation, his poems often enter into a dialogue not only with the classical pastoral form but also with American Romantics such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. As such, Williams’s “suburban” poems represent not a series of contradictions but a progression. These poems chronicle the poet’s struggles with the authenticity of the suburbs, the pastoral form, and the American transcendentalist understanding of nature. In the end, Williams perceives that the suburbs and the enameling of nature within the space are problematic and, ultimately, not authentic at all.

It is essential to recognize that American suburban spaces have existed even prior to the American Revolution—and those spaces have changed over time. In the introduction to his history of American suburbanization, *Crabgrass Frontier*, Kenneth T. Jackson stresses that no singular definition of American suburbs exists. Similarly, Fishman cautions against defining suburbs by their popular connotations. Not all proto-suburbs were clearly organized bedroom communities; old industrial sectors absorbed by

expanding cities were equally suburban spaces. “Suburban” is an elusive signifier responsible for describing a space that has existed throughout the history of human civilization, a point that Lewis Mumford underscores in *The City in History*: “The fact is that the suburb becomes visible almost as early as the city itself” (483). However, this essay is concerned with a very specific moment in the process of American suburbanization—the proto-suburbs of the 1910s and 1920s, or the spaces that would eventually become the dominant suburb of the 1950s.

Given Williams’s interrogation of the pastoral mode and his recognition of the shortfalls of emerging suburban spaces, it is difficult to imagine that he would believe an American poet could find in the suburbs the same poetic inspiration that Emerson found in his conception of the natural world. Williams, in his earlier poetry, often works within the pastoral form in order to unmask the mythology surrounding both the form and the emerging suburban spaces considered in these poems. However, the persona in Williams’s poem “The Tulip Bed,” from his 1921 collection *Sour Grapes*, seems to present an ambivalent response to his suburban home and lawn. Monacell argues that Williams is able to find poetic inspiration in the suburbs. Over the course of his essay, Monacell expands upon and eventually discounts Marsh’s arguments about Williams’s suburban poems, introducing both the history of American suburbanization and other Modernist poets into the discourse—alongside Williams, he also examines the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, and Louis Zukofsky. Concerning Williams’s poetry, Monacell observes that not all of his pastorals are what Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City*, terms “counter-pastorals,” or poems that react against the enameled version of nature often included in pastoral poetry for political or economic reasons

(Raymond Williams 22). Monacell contends that when it comes to the suburbs, Williams “insists that individuality can flourish amidst a seemingly deterministic environment” (126). He argues that although Williams divulges his anxieties about the suburbs, he ultimately believes in the poetic potential of the space.

Monacell employs “The Tulip Bed,” as a compass for how Williams interprets the relationship between nature, the suburbs, and the role of the poet. In “The Tulip Bed,” Williams’s persona attempts to determine and reconcile whether nature or the suburban grid is in control of his residential space. From the beginning, Williams’s persona attributes characteristics of the suburban grid onto nature and characteristics of nature onto the suburban grid. The sun seemingly manufactures the natural world, as it “glues small leaves to / the wooden trees” (168). The shadows that the trees cast below them blur the distinction between road and lawn: “tangled shadows had begun / to join / the roadway and the lawns” (168). As a consequence, the point at which “nature” ends and the grid takes over becomes ambiguous. Even the titular tulip bed imitates the suburban layout, imposing the precision of the suburban grid onto the “nature” included with each suburban plot:

With excellent precision
 the tulip bed
 inside the iron fence
 upreared its gaudy
 yellow, white and red,
 rimmed round with grass,
 reposedly. (168)

The tulip bed, like the trees in the poem, feels as though it has been manufactured. Although the grass experiences repose, the flowers are unnaturally upright and contained within their round plot. Monacell argues that inside the suburban space, “the tulips are unaffected by the fence, and moreover, actually experience ‘repose’ within the border of grass” (128). Williams underscores the effects of the iron fence upon the tulip bed by breaking his line and presenting the two consecutively. Although the two co-exist, their co-existence is not harmonious. Williams’s persona cannot portray the flowers without—perhaps unconsciously—considering how they are affected by the suburban grid. Ultimately, Monacell contends that “Williams finds in his poetic subject a fitting metonym for his own rebellious indolence, which—he is determined—will not be precluded by suburban conformity” (129). However, the poem is riddled with suburban conformity. Williams’s persona’s portrayal of the natural world in “The Tulip Bed” differs greatly from Emerson’s conception of nature. Instead of accessing solitude through the vast landscape, Williams’s persona is given a strict measure of the natural world within his contained plot: a tulip bed. This is not an experience of poetic inspiration; it is one of poetic ambivalence.

Monacell’s interpretation of Williams’s relationship with the suburbs is further complicated by “To Elsie,” Williams’s standout poem from his 1923 avant-garde collection, *Spring and All*. Throughout “To Elsie,” the persona of the poem attempts to take apart and ultimately demonstrate the consequences of suburbanization’s subsumption of Emerson’s ideology. At the beginning of the poem, Williams’s persona presents the “pure products” of the rural landscapes that both the pastoral tradition and Emerson champion. As a result of their disconnection from the landscapes they inhabit,

these subjects have “imagination which have no / peasant traditions to give them / character” (217). From amongst these subjects comes the eponymous Elsie, who is for Williams the embodiment of the proto-suburban subject’s struggle. Elsie is transported by a government agency into the suburbs, and she is “expressing with broken / brain the truth about us—” (218). The “us” whom Williams’s persona references in the poem remains ambiguous. It could be as encompassing as the American public; however, it most likely—again—refers to Williams’s suburban neighbors. Similar to his earlier poem “Pastoral (When I was younger),” Williams’s persona implicates his reader; he even includes himself as an object of Elsie’s critiques.

The truth, Williams’s persona finds in “To Elsie,” is that an idealization of nature prevents him and his suburban neighbors from seeing the struggle of the suburban poor, even when the suburban poor are transplanted into their own homes. Elsie, as Maria Farland argues in “Modernist Versions of Pastoral: Poetic Inspiration, Scientific Expertise, and the ‘Degenerate’ Farmer,” represents the vast portions of the country that have been deprived of their status due to changing perceptions of rural folk: “The poem links Elsie to a network of rural regions whose burnished image in ‘nature’s nation’ has been eclipsed by perceptions of rural ignorance, ill health, and social backwardness” (919). Although Elsie is transplanted into the house of the speaker, her presence is by no means random. Since Williams’s suburbs resulted from the subsumption of a previously rural space, Elsie is a remnant of the neglected population of people who were there before Williams and his neighbors. And if Elsie gives a voice to the ignored and exploited agrarian population, then Williams’s persona attempts to force his bourgeois upper-class counterparts to listen. In the world of Williams’s poem, Elsie cannot be

ignored; although the poem is addressed to her, it is through Elsie that Williams delivers a political argument to his neighbors.

Forcing his reader to come into contact with the suburban poor is a familiar move for Williams. The persona of Williams's "K. McB.," from *Al Que Quiere!*, does something similar; he essentially orders Kathleen (the servant to whom the poem is addressed) to make her presence known to the bourgeois upper class: "Curl up round their shoes / when they try to step on you, / spoil the polish" (107). In "K. McB.," the persona overdetermines Kathleen's connection to the land, calling her an "exquisite chunk of mud" (106) and ordering her to "soil" the pants of the bourgeois upper class who mistreat her. All the while, the persona of the poem enjoys the disorder he causes by encouraging the rebellion of the suburban poor subject: "I shall laugh till I am sick / at their amazement" (107). Williams not only addresses and devotes a poem to K.McB. he also forces his reader to consider her humanity. Referring to K.McB. as "mud" might seem derogatory, but for Williams's persona, this appeal to the connection between her and the earth is emblematic of her rightful claim to the suburban space in which she lives. For the person of Williams's poem, K.McB. is the land's natural occupant; his suburban neighbors are not. She is not, as her social status suggests, inferior to those for whom she works, and she retains the potentiality of rebellion if she is treated as such.

In "To Elsie," the persona also argues that suburban subjects have no claim to the land. They only ignore the reality of the space and indulge the imagination as it "strains / after deer / going by fields of goldenrod" (218). Williams recognizes that this experience of the space is not authentic. It is a misrecognition of the actual space based upon Emerson's idealization of the natural world. The poem's persona takes apart the myth of

his Arcadian space and presents bourgeois upper-class suburbanites, not the rural and suburban poor, as savage creatures:

as if the earth under our feet
 were
 an excrement of some sky
 and we degraded prisoners
 destined
 to hunger until we eat filth (218).

In this way, Williams inverts the expected social relations between the bourgeois upper-class suburbanites and the working poor. Williams's persona presents a destabilizing moment; the ground to which he and his suburban neighbors have no natural claim becomes uncertain as the previous social hierarchy is inverted as a result of the persona's interrogation of the space.

At the end of "To Elsie," no one remains in the landscape. There is "no one / to witness / and adjust, no one to drive the car" (218). No one can drive the car because, ultimately, everyone has been either exploited or deceived by the rise of the American proto-suburbs and the class and social status shift represented by their cultural dominance. Reality can only come through in "isolate flecks," meaning that Williams's neighbors' misrecognition of the suburban space as natural has completely convinced them that it actually *is* natural.

As is also evident in "The Tulip Bed," even Williams feels the effects of living in a manufactured "organic" space. Although he might want to prove to his contemporaries that a poet can reside—and produce poetry—in the suburbs, he does not shy away from

the problems that the space reveals. Like James before him, Williams is able to penetrate the illusion of the proto-suburban space and identify its reality. That is to say, although the proto-suburban spaces appear to exist without any apparent history, to be ripe for cultivation and development, Williams identifies the silenced individual histories of rural subjects that are lost—or intentionally ignored—in the transaction, and he identifies the American pastoral mythology which permits such an oversight.

Conclusion

Williams's early poetry reveals the superficiality of the American proto-suburbs, a space that would come to be characterized by its projection of affluence and uniformity and only decades later would serve as a metonym for American culture. Williams simultaneously critiques and repurposes the pastoral form in order to differentiate the mythology of the space from the material reality, to present the emergent suburbs not as Arcadian but as a problematic projection of Arcadia. In doing so, Williams's poetry identifies and takes apart the popular mythology surrounding nature created by the American literary tradition. Williams rejects both the pastoral ideal and the suburban space manufactured in its image, revealing not only the abject conditions of the remaining suburban poor but also the fact that American suburbanization necessitated the removal of lower-class people in order to reproduce and resell the space as the quintessence of the pastoral ideal. Before the American suburbs became *the* popular American suburbs of the 1950s, Williams's poetry revealed the exclusionary framework on which the space depended. Such an insight remains relevant, as the systemic omission

of the suburban poor and the pervasiveness of the pastoral mythology persists in the contemporary suburbs and exurbs. That is, the mass production model to which the suburbs and exurbs subscribe still functions to hide suburban poverty, epidemics, and, ultimately, the reality of the subjects residing within these spaces. In this way, Williams's poetic project is prescient nearly a century after its initial publication.

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