

The Body Project: Anatomy, Relationships, and Representation
An Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference
University of Missouri
Presented April 12, 2008

Pete Monacell

MU Department of English

Oral presentation

The Suburban Body in American Modern Poetry

Critics seem only recently to have taken note of the prevalence of the suburbs as content in American poetry. Robert Van Hallberg ends his *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* with a brief discussion of the poetry that issued from the suburbs in the 1970's: "In the last decade, several important poets have tried in particular to accommodate the middle and lower-middle classes resident in the suburbs and represented through television, movies, and tabloids." He goes on to argue that this has been the case because, "the actual audience for poetry is suburban only insofar as college and university towns are suburban" (228). In *The American Poetry Wax Museum* Jed Rasula takes a less descriptive, more polemical stance on the poetry of the American suburbs, lambasting the "suburban epiphany," which he claims has become an aspiration of too many contemporary poems (428). Rasula associates the abundance of suburban poetry with university culture and especially the ensconcement of the American poet in academia: "The white collar subject of Whyte's *Organization Man* in the 1950s has, in the 1990s, become the *Organization Poet*, studiously and obediently working up curriculum vitae itemizing the published 'McPoems' . . . by which such careers are profiled" (433).

My presentation argues that poetic representations of the suburbs have existed with remarkable continuity since modernism—a fact made evident in the work of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. I argue that the American suburbs and their correlated middle class lifestyle after WWI provided modernists with a milieu and authorial identity by which to assert aesthetic independence from Europe, and paradoxically in Williams's case, from the regional and local. The suburbs already in these early instances manifest a particularly American space specific to the newfangled American lifestyle. Therefore, American modernists participate in the discourse of Americanization propagated by nationalists of the early century. But posed against the assimilating power of Americanization is suburban nativism, which is to say the suburbs' capacity for defining what is American over and against excluded immigrant cultures. Walter Benn Michaels has linked American literary modernism, particularly its concern with "the materiality of the signifier," to nativism, which like modernism itself is an effort "to work out the meaning of the commitment to identity—linguistic, national, cultural, racial" (2-3). My presentation departs from such a semiotic strategy and argues that modernist poets centralized the suburbs in characterizing the common identity of Americans.

The presentation interprets early poems by Stevens as stemming from the nativist suburbs and then discusses his first long poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar” with emphasis on its invented setting of “Oxidia,” the prototypical suburban environment where the middle class poet might ground his fictions. William Carlos Williams’s similar identification as a middle class suburbanite complicates his much-noted concern with locality, mainly because the homogeneous suburbs cannot maintain the particularities called for in Williams’s localist programmatic. “Modernist Suburbs” reads passages from *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All* to show that, as Louis Zukofsky wrote of Williams’s poem “The pure products of America go crazy,” Williams captured “the social determinism of American suburbs in the first thirty years of the twentieth century” (150). My presentation shows that for American modernists the socially determined suburban body—both the body politic and the individual suburbanite—contained within it very much the same significations that it has today.

Works Cited

Michaels, Walter Benn. *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.

Rasula, Jed. *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects 1940-1990*. New York: National Council of Teachers, 1996.

Van Hallberg, Robert. *American Poetry and Culture: 1945-1980*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985.

Zukofsky, Louis. *Propositions: The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky*. Hanover NH: Wesleyan, 2000.