

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Homebound: Reflections on Spatial Difference as a Suburban Child

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As many of us are now homebound and primarily living virtually, I am reminded of how being at home as a child prompted me to read texts (television and novels) spatially and become more cognizant of spatial differences and injustice. I learned how to read and reflect on my surroundings without leaving the house.

Being a first and second generation Canadian child living in a suburban landscape presents unique challenges and opportunities in relation to developing and expressing spatial practices. When coupled with race, gender, class and mobility, the experiences of Canadian children in the suburbs can vary immensely.

In my case, I felt largely confined to our home, and in this piece, I will discuss how, as a child, I approached Canadian youth television and young adult historical fiction as spatial texts, which enabled me to reflect on my own relationship with place. Television and literary texts offer those who are spatially limited or less mobile (such as suburban children) to reflect on their own spatial limitations and privileges, conceptualize spatial injustice and connect with other marginalized identities. I think we can even extend these reflections to the current coronavirus pandemic that has gripped our geographical realities.

### **The Image of the Suburb**

When I was 10 years old, I was in a Toronto-area suburb, living in a large subdivision of meandering crescents, winding roads, looping streets, and cul-de-sacs. Childhood experiences shape how we think about community, space and geography. This is when we start to develop

our own spatial practice, and growing up in the suburbs carries certain connotations. Being a suburban kid, theoretically, is supposed to mean you have parents or guardians who shuttle you to extracurriculars, sports practices, piano lessons, and sleepovers. Perhaps, the suburban experience is also supposed to be emblematic of summer camps, cottage weekends, and family trips.

I have spent a lot of my time as an urban planner challenging these stereotypes – I think our suburban landscapes and experiences in the Toronto area are much more complicated than that when you consider race, immigration, and class barriers, and I believe there are many people who do not have the so-called stereotypical suburban experiences.

The suburbs are also known for their design – wide arterial roads where cars rule, an unfriendly pedestrian experience, a lack of transit infrastructure, and amenities that are spread far apart. In the Toronto area, we have suburbs that are lined with strip malls that tell us about the communities that live nearby, apartment neighbourhoods on ravines and parks, inward-facing townhome complexes. Suburbs have been about distance, separation – they have been about both abundance and lack. I do not believe that the stories of suburbs can be simply equated with the white flight and upper middle class narratives we seem to inherit from our American counterparts. Our suburbs force us to reposition ourselves, ask difficult questions, and grapple with spatial privilege.

My experience growing up in the suburbs probably looks different from the images circulated in North American popular culture. I lived in a neighbourhood that was mostly brown and Black, and most of my classmates were either first or second generation Canadians. There was not really anywhere I could walk to and explore, so the spatial stories I encountered were on television and in novels. I would usually rush home after school, through the park behind all the portables, across a busy road, and then around the corner to my home, so I could watch TV or read. I lived in a neighbourhood, that on the surface, probably did not look like much, but I realized later was layered with stories. As in the stories I encountered in fiction, difference was at the forefront of our daily lives. There were stories of newcomers and refugees, poverty and intergenerational conflict, sadness and violence: things we may not immediately associate with the suburbs. Racialized suburban spaces are often treated with suspicion, which is understandable, because they tend to subvert what we think a suburb should look like. Once the typical suburban veneer of white-picket fences and fresh lawns is scratched through, news articles about the suburbs will often suggest there is something sinister, off-putting, atypical or unsafe about these brown places in the suburbs. The comment sections on these articles typically feature white residents (or former residents) decrying ‘changing demographics’ and lamenting the loss of the suburb’s whiteness.

### **My Introduction to Canadian Youth Television**

In reflecting on the current pandemic and literary geographies in isolation, I think about how the coronavirus has disrupted spatial practices for children and I wonder: in what ways can we encourage spatial independence and curiosity for children during a public health crisis? I think that spatially-specific television can provoke children to consider how they engage with

their own neighbourhood and surroundings, and help them identify spatial differences in the stories they consume.

I was a 10-year-old brown kid in the suburbs, who came to know urban Toronto through the experiences of a group of kids in a 1980s-era, pre-gentrified east-end community in Toronto on *Degrassi*. I immediately noted that the teen drama series had a very deliberate urban setting - specifically the historically working class Riverdale and Leslieville neighbourhoods. The characters not only navigated adolescence and teen issues, but also community and space – and I came to know their neighbourhood through the scenes in which the characters walk home from school.

Rick lived at Queen Street and Carlaw Avenue, on the second floor of a restaurant. He mentions that he lives near a factory and noted that it ‘smells so bad’ in the summer. I thought this was an interesting acknowledgement of Leslieville’s industrial character at the time. Similarly, Yick tells us he lives in a ‘big house with about a million relatives’. We learn that Yick came to Toronto as a refugee from Vietnam, which is a nod to De Grassi’s proximity to East Chinatown, where many Southeast Asian newcomers settled in the 1970s and 1980s. On Lucy’s walk home, we learn she lives in a typical Victorian-era home, and once inside, we see she likely comes from affluence. Her friends, the twins, are impressed with the interior décor and say: ‘Wow! Your parents must be loaded!’ Lucy scoffs and says: ‘You should see our loft in Manhattan!’ Perhaps Lucy and her parents are early gentrifiers of this east-end neighbourhood.

### ***The Kids of Degrassi Street***

*The Kids of Degrassi Street* was the first iteration of the *Degrassi* franchise and centered around the stories and misadventures of a group of friends who lived on De Grassi Street, in Toronto’s east-end Riverdale neighbourhood. In the spirit of documentary realism, producers Linda Schuyler and Kit Hood hired 52 children from the area who had no previous acting experience, in order to accurately portray the urban Toronto neighbourhood. Furthermore, the series was filmed on location, making use of the street itself as a setting, as well as the local elementary school, De Grassi Grocery, and the homes of the De Grassi Street residents (Mathuria 2011). *Degrassi* grounded us in the real stories of east-end kids, and their sense of community came from each other and the relationship to their neighbourhood.

De Grassi Street and its environs become a place for the kids to explore, wander through, and claim as their own, when left to their own devices and without parental supervision. Together, the kids walk to school, play in a nearby park, or head to one of the local stores. Outside of their homes and independent of their parents, the children gather and take viewers through their inner-city neighbourhood. The visual and narrative clues reveal that De Grassi Street is a working class community, where families worry about money, and where parents work as contractors, cab drivers, artists, and piano teachers.

In the series, walking is the main method of transportation, exemplifying their proximity to amenities such as city parks, community spaces, and important services. Spatial practice, as exemplified in this series, derives not only from the children’s independence, but also from

their knowledge of their city. For the children, spatial practice derives from their common pride for De Grassi Street, and their use of city spaces to create a sense of community.

### ***Ready or Not***

*Ready or Not*, a popular preteen drama from the 1990s, depicts Canadian suburbia as a middle-class, family-oriented experience. Filmed on-location in Scarborough, Etobicoke and Mississauga, Ontario, *Ready or Not* shifts from *The Kids of Degrassi Street*'s working-class urban narrative to a middle-class suburban setting.

The producers of *Ready or Not* utilize space in a similar manner as *Degrassi* by using the homes of real people and making use of an actual suburban neighbourhood as the primary setting. In a Season 2 episode, best friends Elizabeth 'Busy' Ramone and Amanda Zimm, the series' main characters, wander through Morningside Mall, one of many shopping malls in the suburb of Scarborough, Ontario. As they meander through stores, Amanda fantasizes about running away from home, where her parents are on the verge of breaking up, and living at the mall. The mall offers the comforts of the suburban home, without the constant family bickering.

Amanda and Busy's homes both become important components of the series' sense of space and setting, as they incorporate the family structure and dynamics. In children's literature, the middle-class home functions as a protective and cushioned space that shelters children from the "outside", however the family wishes define that word (Reimer 2008).

In comparison to *The Kids of Degrassi Street*, Busy and Amanda are geographically restricted by their location, with many scenes either at their school or in their homes. Busy and Amanda wander through their neighbourhood via foot, bike, public transit, and parent chauffeur. A typical scene would feature the girls riding their bikes through one of the subdivisions or parks, homebound, to arrive just in time for a family meal. Amanda and Busy's movements and spatial practices mirror what I observed in the suburbs too – contending with suburban design, children would walk to the park, the ravine, or the distant corner store by traversing neighbourhood boundaries, creating their own paths, and discovering short-cuts.

While watching *Ready or Not* and *Degrassi*, I reflected on the differing experiences for children in urban Toronto compared to the suburbs. The children on *Degrassi* navigate their east-end neighbourhood with relative ease, and the privilege of having access to amenities such as transit, walkable streets, and nearby services in order to practice spatial independence. *Ready or Not* demonstrates suburban dependency, where children appear more spatially limited, with their adventures and narratives primarily centered around their homes – this aligned more with my own experiences. By having to walk (or bike, if they have access) longer distances, rely on unreliable bus routes or parental drivers, suburban kids must contend with design restrictions and develop spatial practices in other ways. In series like *Degrassi* and *Ready or Not*, representations of real places offer interesting stories about various Canadian experiences in relation to not only space – but class, race and family.

### **Historical Fiction**

During this time of limited geography, children can also be encouraged to “travel” by engaging with reading materials that allow them encounter stories across geographical and temporal contexts. For example, in addition to Canadian television, historical fiction novels played a large role in my early experiences with spatial narratives. At my local library, I would beeline to the young adult section and deliberately only select novels with the “historical fiction” tag on the spine. These novels introduced me to a number of historic moments and systemic issues that were often absent or skimmed over in my elementary school classes – for example, the residential school system in Canada, segregation and discrimination against Black Americans, the history of Chinese rail workers, and Japanese internment. These novels often featured child protagonists straddling two cultures, confronting prejudice, and contemplating the concept of home. The texts, of course, not only provided interesting historical insights as a child, but were also deeply spatial narratives that taught me about how children responded to spatial injustices. Laurence Yep’s novels, for example, featured Chinese American experiences in the late 1800s and early 1900s in places such as West Virginia and California. The protagonists lived in Chinatowns and in white communities. In his novel *Dragonwings* (1975), Moon Shadow moves to San Francisco’s Chinatown in the early 1900s to be with his father, Windrider. While the novel focuses on Windrider’s dream of flying, readers also catch glimpses of early life of spatial segregation for Chinese migrants in San Francisco, and how their community was devastated by the 1906 earthquake. *The Star Fisher* (1991), on the other hand, follows Joan Lee and her family as they adjust to life in a predominately white town in West Virginia. In both novels, the child protagonists learn to maneuver through white supremacy in different ways – in Moon Shadow’s San Francisco, Chinatown is a clearly spatially delineated area that separates the Chinese from the city’s white residents. Chinatown is viewed as suspect by the white population, and it is within this delineation that Moon Shadow develops his own spatial practice and identity. In *The Star Fisher*, Joan interacts more with the surrounding white community, as there is no “Chinatown” where she lives. As such, the spatial conflicts she encounters differ from Moon Shadow’s – Joan and her family are more highly visible, interactions with the community are fraught and suspect, and so a lot of the novel retreats to the family home. Yep is interested in the idea of the Chinese American outsider in fiction. In a 2005 article, he says: ‘I’ve been charting the adventures of a group of Chinese American outsiders, the Young family and their friends, as they journey through the American hopescape--to borrow Virginia Hamilton's phrase for that vast psychological wilderness created by American dreams’ (Yep 2005: 53). While offering important historical insights into early Chinese migration to the US, Yep’s novels also exemplify how children, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, are vigilant observers of spatial injustice and quickly learn to adapt their own spatial practices around limitations and restrictions. By reading these novels as a child, I could reflect on my own spatial privileges and constraints. With the current pandemic, staying home means that we may interact with different spaces within our cities and towns even less, and so I think historical fiction with spatial themes can present children with new ways of understanding spatial injustices and disparities. In addition,

these texts might help children reflect on how the pandemic exacerbates inequities across different spaces.

## Conclusion

Over the past year, we have witnessed the different ways in which the coronavirus pandemic has limited our movements, halted travel, and confined many of us to limited geographies. We have also witnessed a global movement for Black Lives Matter, with calls to action that are also deeply rooted in spatial justice. This long moment of being homebound has reminded me of my suburban childhood, and more broadly, it prompted me to consider how children might be experiencing the pandemic and how it might have disrupted their sense of place. As I hope I have illustrated, as a child, imaginary geographies in television and historical fiction allowed me to observe how other children navigate space, difference and injustice, and contemplate my own (albeit restricted) relationship to place. As place thinkers (geographers, city planners, designers, etc.), we often undermine how astute and observant children and youth are, especially as they develop their own spatial practices and begin to experience space and difference independent from their parents/guardians and family. If we recognize that spatially, suburban landscapes are limiting, ill-suited for creating ‘complete communities and vibrant neighbourhoods’, then what happens to those kids who are limited to the confines of their home? In the context of the current pandemic, how might these suburban challenges be compounded? This is when, I think, kids begin can develop their sense of place in other ways – perhaps they turn to fiction and television. Even when homebound, suburban children still reflect on spatial difference and practices, by interacting with spatial narratives on television and in novels, and observing how others negotiate mobility and injustice.

## Works Cited

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