

**Into the Postsuburban Thirdspace: T. Coraghessan Boyle's,
The Tortilla Curtain (1995)**

In his 1995 novel, *The Tortilla Curtain*, T. Coraghessan Boyle portrays an undocumented Mexican couple's struggle for survival in the interstices of society in the outer limits of Los Angeles, juxtaposing their fortunes with those of an affluent Anglo couple living a fearful, selfish existence behind the dubious protection of a walled development situated in Topanga Canyon called Arroyo Blanco Estates.

The lives of the two couples become inextricably linked as the Rincóns - Cándido and América - take odd jobs working for the exurb's WASP residents and the Mossbachers - Delaney and Kyra - and indeed the whole Arroyo Blanco community, try to come to terms with both the presence of the illegal Mexican workforce and the harshness of the canyon environment. The novel climaxes in biblical style with a fire and a flood threatening the lives of all of those dwelling in Topanga Canyon, and with Cándido rescuing Delaney from a tumultuous landslide by pulling him to safety on the rooftop of a post office.

I use the term exurb here to denote a particular type of space that can be seen as comprising the postsuburban environment. The history of American suburbia has been well-told elsewhere: by 1959, nine million of the booming American population lived in suburbs newly-created on the back of favourable mortgage deals and tax-breaks; the majority were affluent, middle-class and white, looking to escape the perceived depredations of the city.¹ However, by the 1990s the suburban landscape had changed considerably: the relentless outward spread of freeways lead to a new environment that was more than simply a residential subdivision. The classic postwar suburb had been transformed into, or superseded by, a polycentric economically,

¹ For a more complete discussion of this process see Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

culturally and politically self-sufficient new metropolitan form: what geographer Edward Soja has termed, ‘the city turned inside out’.² This change in the configuration of urban/suburban space has led to the catch-all phrase, ‘suburbs’, being modified to recognise the different types of landscapes: now it is common to read about, ‘mature suburbs’, ‘emerging suburbs’, ‘exurbs’ and ‘edge cities’,³ a reflection of the way in which metropolitan sprawl has dissolved previous formal categorisations.

Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* recognises a certain postsuburban typology in taking as its settings both the exurb of Topanga Canyon, and the decaying inner-ring suburb of Canoga Park. Through this paper I hope to demonstrate how Boyle's novel complicates a cultural conception of suburbia by suggesting that the simple binary of suburb and city is no longer viable and that the postsuburban spaces of Los Angeles actually represent an environment that is undergoing a socio-spatial transformation akin to the processes of deterritorialisation and decolonisation. It is my contention that *Tortilla*'s narrative shows how, through contact with the Mexican pair's incursions into their postsuburban environment, the abstracted colonial ideal of the Arroyo Blanco estate is actually undermined and hybridised. Reflecting on Bhabha's thirdspace formulation, Robert C. Young writes that it is a paradigm that reveals the ways in which colonial discourses are ‘effectively decentred from [their] position[s] of power and authority’, and that this process occurs ‘when authority becomes hybridized when placed in a colonial context and finds itself layered against other cultures’.⁴ In this way, Boyle endeavours to break down the dichotomous formula of ‘self’ and ‘other’ that has characterised previous suburban fictions.

² Edward W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 250.

³ See Mike Davis, 'Obama at Manassas', in, *New Left Review* 56, March-April 2009, pp. 5-40; see also, Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Random House, 1991).

⁴ Robert C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 161.

At the outset of *The Tortilla Curtain*,⁵ it is apparent that the residents of the Arroyo Blanco estate consider themselves to be colonists of the relatively unpopulated edges of the Los Angeles metropolitan area. As such, the settlement is in marked contrast to the nearby inner-ring suburban communities of Canoga Park or the San Fernando Valley: in Arroyo Blanco, space is controlled in the name of privacy and exclusivity. Early on, Arroyo is described as ‘a private community...strictly conforming to the covenants...[and] conforming to the Spanish mission style... [in] three prescribed shades of white’ (30). These details are significant because they position the estate within a national tradition of colonial power, specifically echoing both the early Puritan settlers whose communities were bonded by strict ecclesiastical covenants designed to encourage cooperation and civic responsibility in the face of a hostile environment, and the Spanish colonisers who settled in what became the south-western corner of the United States. In Arroyo Blanco, the architectural style of the Spanish missions has been fetishised as a commodity, with the ‘shades of white’ conferring on the nascent community some semblance of historical authenticity, and a patriarchal system of community meetings established to ensure the community’s smooth operation. Boyle leaves us in no doubt, however, that Arroyo is a community founded on a fantasy, a fantasy that has its basis in the particular spatiality of postsuburban Los Angeles. The logic of sprawl, by which the formerly clearly demarcated city and suburbs have become intermingled in an inexorable spreading outwards from a onetime predominant core, has left the inhabitants of Arroyo Blanco – being as they are on the edge of this progression – with the delusion that their need for space automatically makes space theirs: as Delaney states late on in the novel in defiance of what he sees as the insurgent Mexican hordes, ‘this was his canyon, his

⁵ T. Coraghessan Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995; London: Bloomsbury, 1997). All future references to the novel will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text. From this point on, the novel will be referred to as *Tortilla*.

house, his life' (313). I want to propose that the narrative's power comes from the way in which Boyle structures it around a number of ruptures in this spatial matrix. Throughout, Cándido in particular employs, to use the language of Henri Lefebvre, a number of 'tactics' designed to transform the particular 'moments' he finds himself in.⁶ The postsuburban spaces of the Arroyo exurb, although designed to exclude, in fact become the lacunae through which Cándido creates his own resistant lived experiences. As a result of the Arroyo residents' appropriation of the canyon space, he is at the mercy of their walls, gates, fences and roads, his individual agency limited as he is, in his words, 'bounced from one to another of them like a pinball' (121). Yet, it is his ability to exist and survive, in spite of this, in order, at the novel's end, to then pull the solipsistic Delaney from the river, that is central to *Tortilla's* operation and its suggestion that a cosmopolitan, transnational postsuburban landscape can be a thirdspace of radical reinvention.

The postsuburban environment that Boyle's novel suggests should be possible to achieve is one in which space and land use are depoliticized, a space that is democratic and open, not restrictive and divisive. In a key section in part two, the men of the Arroyo estate convene to discuss the need for a security wall around the community. Delaney, at this stage of the narrative less of a reactionary than he later becomes, is initially aghast at the proposition and retorts that, "Next thing you'll want to wall the whole place in like a medieval city or something" (189). This sort of landscape, purposefully designed to preserve a status quo of wealth and top-down power, has been identified by the cultural geographer John Brinckerhoff Jackson as being one common to Europe from the 1400s onwards: a landscape in which land

⁶ Quoted in Nicholas Spencer, *After Utopia: The Rise of Critical Space in Twentieth-Century American Fiction*, Lincoln, NB and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006, p. 130 ff. Spencer's discussion on the transformation of space as far as Henri Lefebvre's analysis is concerned draws primarily on Lefebvre's, *Critique of Everyday Life – Vol. 1*, John Moore trans., London: Verso, 1991 and *Critique of Everyday Life – Vol. 2*, John Moore trans., London: Verso, 2002.

itself ‘means property and permanence and power’, designed to insist on distinctions between ‘public and private, rich and poor’ as well as uphold the ‘linear frontier between nations’.⁷ In contrast, what *Tortilla* satirically expresses is a hope for a landscape derived from, in Jackson’s words, our ‘relationship with other people... [that] when we talk about the importance of *place*, the necessity of belonging to a *place*... place means the people in it’.⁸ Writing in 1984 and anticipating/responding to the breakdown of previous urban/suburban binaries, the struggle over the outcome of which forms the essential drama of *Tortilla*, Jackson identifies the postsuburban landscape as a new

kind of... community that we are seeing all over America: at remote construction sites, in recreation areas, in trailer courts, in the shanty towns of wetbacks and migrant workers... [this is] the emergence of what we may call vernacular communities.⁹

Such postsuburban communities are the very opposite of the insular Arroyo Blanco estate and exist in *Tortilla* in embryonic form in spite of Arroyo Blanco’s existence. Boyle organises his narrative around the establishment of these communities with Cándido and América’s attempts to carve out their own postsuburban space culminating at the novel’s end in the prototypical ‘vernacular community’, including Delaney, atop the roof of the post office.

Throughout, Cándido exercises a vital and necessary pragmatism in ensuring his and América’s survival in coexisting with the Arroyans. For example, the wall built by the residents of the estate and intended to keep the Mexicans out, ironically becomes for Cándido a symbol of hope: at a moment in the narrative when he is in despair at his misfortune in accidentally setting fire to the canyon he’d called home, Cándido recognises the wall as an opportunity, not a further obstacle. Cándido works

⁷ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 152.

⁸ Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, p. 155.

⁹ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 152, 155, 156.

his way along the wall, ‘feeling for an opening’ (280); he is able to find such a rupture in the defensive spatiality of the Arroyans’ postsuburban world and proceeds to scavenge through the detritus of this community of excess, transforming such quotidian stuff as plastic sheeting for his own ends – in this case the building of a shelter for América and himself (304). In a telling twist, Boyle has Cándido and América take shelter in the estate’s maintenance shed where América actually ends up giving birth. And thus, a modest outbuilding designed to house the materials necessary to keep the pools and sidewalks of the estate pristine ends up maintaining a Mexican family in the direst need (301). Similarly, in his resourcefulness, Cándido is able to tap into some of the estate’s jealously-guarded resources by siphoning off water after ‘spending a whole night digging a trench up the hill and tapping into the development’s sprinkler system’ (325). Through the figure of Cándido, Boyle undermines the Arroyo residents’ exclusive use of land and calls for a more utilitarian and egalitarian approach to space based on need not status.

So, in *Tortilla*, Boyle’s postsuburban setting is a fictional expression of a space that, in Lefebvre’s theorisation, is a ‘region of resistance beyond the established centers of power’;¹⁰ that is to say that, as opposed to the spatial paradigm of the centre/periphery which informed perspectives on the postwar suburb as being symbiotically linked with the city, postsuburbia exists as a thirdspace where marginalised subjects (such as Cándido and América) are made definable. Conventionally, we might think of Cándido and América emerging *from* the thirdspace of the Mexican/American borderlands, but in my appreciation of *Tortilla I* want to contend that we can also think of Cándido and América as emerging *into* the thirdspace of postsuburban Los Angeles, a spatial praxis defined as much by its lack

¹⁰ Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 30.

of definition as the urban/suburban configuration was defined by the starkness of its polarity. If previous suburban fictions reinforced the idea that the suburbs were socially and culturally homogeneous even as they decried that fact, *Tortilla*, in contrast, shows the postsuburban landscape to be, if not a literal border then a figurative one where, in the words of anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, ‘the notion of an authentic culture as an autonomous, internally coherent universe no longer seems tenable’.¹¹

In the postsuburban thirdspace of his novel, Boyle has Cándido and América stake a claim to this new territory, despite their poverty. One critic of the novel has in fact described the pair as ‘new immigrants’ in that they ‘refuse the label of victim, they eschew the ghetto, they exploit their opportunities’.¹² The residents of Arroyo Blanco indubitably regard the Mexican illegals as a threat, not because of any disgust at physical difference (in the course of the novel many of the immigrants are given work in the homes and gardens of the wealthy white population, after all) but because of their status as marginal people. In her work, *Powers of Horror* (1980), Julia Kristeva explains that that which causes abjection in one group of people is the other group’s status as a people which ‘does not respect borders, positions... [in other words the] in-between, the ambiguous’.¹³ With regard to *Tortilla*, this corresponds to the deep-seated fear and disgust of the Arroyo population for the Mexicans. But Boyle’s novel - in fusing Delaney’s life with Cándido’s, the culmination of which narrative strategy is the climactic act of kindness perpetrated by the latter in rescuing the former from the landslide - calls for what Bhabha has termed a “‘culture of humanity’” to replace a hegemonic articulation of culture which defines itself in

¹¹ Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 217.

¹² Geraldine Stoneham, ‘It’s a Free Country: Visions of Hybridity in the Metropolis’, in, Ashok Berry and Patricia Murray, eds., *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures: Dislocations* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 91.

¹³ Kelly Oliver, ed., *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 232.

opposition to a notional 'other'.¹⁴ My argument therefore is that Boyle's novel functions as a postsuburban narrative that questions boundaries of oppression and alienation and recognises, in Brian Jarvis' words, the 'counter-hegemonic potential of deviant, abject spaces'¹⁵ such as the various hovels and camps Cándido and América establish in and around the Arroyo Blanco estate.

It is probably helpful at this point to acknowledge the symbolic nature of the dénouement to the narrative. The implications of Cándido's rescue of Delaney from the landslide on the effect of Boyle's narrative are profound: the new start that will inevitably follow the natural disasters that have afflicted the canyon community will not include Cándido and América's baby, a newly-born American citizen lost in the torrent of mud, but instead will include Delaney, a chastened, previously cynical American citizen who owes his life to the intervention of a Mexican man he had wrongly demonised. Just as significantly, the narrative tells us that the trio are washed up on a tile roof: literally they are 'saved by the United States Post Office' (354), but metaphorically they owe their lives to a building that is emblematic of community, one of the remaining public spaces in a particular postsuburban landscape constituted by an urge amongst its residents to make the majority of places private. Certainly, my reading of the novel - and emphasis on the allegorical nature of the narrative's finale - would dispute the claims made by another critic, Elisabeth Schäfer-Wünsche, that, by its end, 'the rigid binaries of the story remain intact' with Boyle clearly re-inscribing 'the asymmetry of... power relations'.¹⁶

Boyle also subverts the paranoiac approach of the Arroyans in highlighting their inability to perceive people as individuals rather than groups to which easy and

¹⁴ Homi Bhabha, quoted in, Stoneham, 'It's a Free Country', p. 90.

¹⁵ Brian Jarvis, *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 192.

¹⁶ Elisabeth Schäfer-Wünsche, 'Borders and Catastrophes: T. C. Boyle's Californian Ecology', in Klaus Benesch and Kerstin Schmidt, eds., *Space in America: Theory, History, Culture* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 407, 405.

convenient (not to say prejudicial) labels can be applied. In doing this, Boyle piles on the irony thickly. The shadowy figure of the Mexican drifter Candelario Pérez problematises the conception of all Mexicans as a perfidious threat to the white middle-classes. Whilst the Arroyans would prefer to see Pérez as metonymically standing for the entire body of dangerous Mexican immigrants at their gate, the narrative reveals him to be representative of humanity's shortcomings, rather than any particularly ethnocentric weaknesses; it is Pérez, after all, who assaults his fellow Mexican América in a secluded spot in the canyon whilst later leaving WASP Kyra untouched despite encountering her when she is similarly vulnerable. This, in my opinion, further questions any reading of the novel that sees a persistence of what Schäfer-Wünsche terms the 'rigid binaries'¹⁷ of colonial power relations; additionally, Boyle further complicates this question of simple ethnic antipathy by revealing the teenagers of Arroyo as the vandals who have been graffitiiing the white stucco exteriors of the estate's buildings, a defilement that Delaney and other Arroyans instinctively link to the Mexicans in general and Cándido in particular. And yet, these are the very same teenagers who, in an act of kindness seemingly at odds with their anarchic actions with the spray cans, give to Cándido a thanksgiving turkey when he cannot afford one himself (256).

The argument here has been that Boyle's narrative clearly problematises the power relationships of the postsuburban environment in and around the exurb of Arroyo Blanco, presenting it as a thirdspace in which a continual dialogue between the affluent white residents and the transient Mexicans is evident. The way in which Boyle structures the narrative around the many encounters and crossings between the various protagonists in my view renders *Tortilla* a fiction that calls into question received ways of constructing identity – particularly those concerned with the

¹⁷ Schäfer-Wünsche, 'Borders and Catastrophes', p. 407.

establishment of community along the lines of difference.

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