

*Bodies at Risk: Urban Danger in*

*Zsuzsi Gartner's "City of my Dreams" and Maggie Helwig's Girls Fall Down*

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In her 2008 novel *Girls Fall Down*, Maggie Helwig notes the constant threat of danger in the contemporary urban landscape of Toronto that can come from either below the city or from above it: "This is the nature of safety in the measured world—you can be certain of the presence of danger, but you can never guarantee its absence" (16). Zsuzsi Gartner's collection *All the Anxious Girls on Earth* (1999) presents an apocalyptic vision of Vancouver, described as "equal parts whimsy and rot" (26); Lewis, the protagonist of "City of my Dreams," anxiously desires to escape its ground-level dangers by exiling herself to the City of Glass<sup>1</sup> above, where "she felt lighter, as if air were truly thinner seventeen stories above" (258). Both texts are representative of recent attention being paid by writers, literary critics, cultural theorists, and social historians to urban realities in Canada<sup>2</sup>, and a turn away from the legacies of the garrison (Frye) and survival (Atwood) that has been so pervasive in our national mythologies so as to more accurately describe the "lived experiences of most Canadians, who overwhelmingly live in urban environments," as Edwards and Ivison argue in their introduction to *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities* (6). Understanding that space is "not simply a natural environment against

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<sup>1</sup> See *City of Glass: Douglas Coupland's Vancouver*. Vancouver, B.C: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> One of the first published anthologies of contemporary urban writing in Canada is *Concrete Forest: The New Fiction of Urban Canada* (1998). There is a growing body of criticism on the Canadian city. See, for instance: *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities* (2005); *Vancouver: Representing the Postmodern City* (1994); *Montréal Imaginaire: Ville et Littérature* (1992); *Claiming Space: Racialization in Canadian Cities* (2006); *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* (2006); *City Lives and City Forms: Critical Research and Canadian Urbanism* (1996); *Negotiating Identities in 19th and 20th Century Montreal* (2005); *Culture of Cities Under Construction* (2001); and *Imagining Toronto* (2010).

which we struggle or onto which we impose ourselves, but is rather something that we play an active role in producing and shaping” (Edwards and Ivison 5), this essay will examine how space is produced *by* and is productive *of* urban bodies and, more specifically, the marginalized urban bodies of women and the homeless. In the following pages, I will examine the representation of Vancouver and Toronto from the point of view of its most marginalized dwellers. Gartner and Helwig’s texts are representative of recent fictionalizations of Canadian urban spaces that not only highlight diversities of class, ethnicity, and gender, but also show how Canadian cities are increasingly linked to global locations, becoming vectors in the migrations of capital, labour, and media. They show that the Canadian city is “simultaneously the product of regional, national, and global factors, [...] and as such provides us with the grounds for a literature and a criticism that can engage with the global without losing sight of the local” (Edwards & Ivison 6). In this endeavour, I will draw upon human geography, feminist critique, and considerations of class in order to show the complex interfaces between bodies, the material city, and the socio-economic forces that shape and give them meaning.

*All the Anxious Girls on Earth*, published in 2000, transforms the “intolerable anxiety” of Atwood’s wilderness and cultural survival into an apocalyptic but engaged vision of contemporary urban life in Canada, as Sherie Posesorski suggests in an interview conducted in 2012 in which Gartner admits “my characters do things. They get out there after going through grotesque tragedies and awful experiences. They don’t just sit there at the kitchen table, looking out at the ice floe, saying, my life is doomed. Their anxiety is a positive energy force” (Posesorski). Gartner’s work as a journalist, editor and cultural observer is evident in the attention paid to both the banal and the extraordinary in Canadian cities. As Ginny Ratsoy observes in a review of the collection, “Gartner’s fiction, set in fin de millennium urban Canada,

foregrounds this ‘real world’ interest in a fascination with both consumer goods and media pervasiveness. [...] the distinctiveness of the cities that Gartner limns is not elided. Hers is not a homogeneous culture; indeed, her narratives evince an acute consciousness of, even a preoccupation with, the specificity of place” (86). Gartner’s writing style suggests an ironic, darkly humorous critique of urban life, and, in the story being considered here, of a city that sees itself as an environmentally responsible, socially conscientious global citizen, but one that repeatedly turns away from its own dark underbelly. If Gartner’s urban fiction demonstrates a parodic and ironic distance that demands “recognition of complicity” (Hutcheon 66), Helwig’s novel blends traditional urban-realist criticism with a similar vision of atrophied social and urban order, if not outright dystopic nightmare. Recognizing that “the contemporary urban experience is not a subject that dominates Canadian fiction,” in his review of *Girls Fall Down*, Steven W. Beattie suggests that as a politicized writer, Helwig is “adept at capturing the peculiar post-9/11 psyche that admits a kind of pervasive paranoia about the urban environment, which can suddenly seem a seething cauldron of threat and danger without reason or basis” (36). In an interview conducted in 2012, the author explains her double-edged vision of Canada’s largest city:

I think you could tell a story about fear and disease and gender and how a city operates, and set that story anywhere, but it would play out differently. This novel is how I imagine those things playing out in Toronto as its own particular self, with its slightly chill restraint and careful politeness, its specific negotiations around race and class and culture, its specific ways of half-acknowledging and half-erasing extreme poverty and homelessness, its specific relationship with mental illness and marginalization.<sup>3</sup>

Both Helwig and Gartner, I will suggest, envision the Canadian city as a landscape of danger, toxicity, and source of corporeal pollution—particularly in terms of marginalized subjects such

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<sup>3</sup> “Maggie Helwig’s *Girls Fall Down* named 2012 One Book: Toronto.”  
<http://49thshelf.com/Blog/2012/02/21/Maggie-Helwig-s-Girls-Fall-Down-named-2012-One-Book-Toronto-author-interview>

as the poor, the homeless, prostitutes, and supposedly fragile women in urban spaces. If in traditional narrative accounts of the modern city women in public spaces were often seen as potential victims of male forms of subjecthood, control, and even aggression, in these contemporary works, the material city seemingly penetrates the female body with pollutants—poisons, dirt, and urban detritus, but also the moral and psychological pollution that often accompanies sex work, drug addiction, and vagrancy.

Doreen Massey has demonstrated how the rise of industrial capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to increasingly gender-specific spaces of activity, arguing that “the social and spatial organization of work” was crucial to the naturalization of forms of dwelling for men and women: “Place and gender are interrelated: that is, in their very construction as culturally specific ideas—in terms both of the conceptual nature of that construction and of its substantive content—and in the overlapping and interplaying of the sets of characteristics and connotations with which each is associated” (2). Public and private spaces were and continue to be coded differently, and expectations around the permissible and the subversive in each context has been clearly delineated by the organization of physical, symbolic, and psychic spaces in accordance with a patriarchal vision of capitalism and its social hierarchies. The spatial mobility of male and female bodies connote different things; in males, conquest, industry, rationalization, the transformation of material resources and spaces into forms of wealth; in women, spatial mobility connotes transgression and subversion of spatial expectations in both public and private spheres. This binary spatial articulation extends to descriptions of bodies themselves, as male corporeality is denied or put under erasure in the aim of equating the male with the rational, with the intellect—with transforming the world through productive activities, while the female body is represented as passive receptacle—as something acted upon rather than something which acts.

As Elizabeth Grosz suggests, “the body has been and is still closely associated with women and the feminine, whereas the mind remains associatively and implicitly connected to men and the masculine” (*Space* 32). What then, one may ask, is the relationship between the body and the city? In “Body Politic and Political Bodies,” Grosz argues that there are two traditional conceptions of the relationship between bodies and the city: the city is either a “projection, reflection, or product of bodies” in whereby “bodies are conceived in naturalistic terms, predating the city, the cause and motivation for their design and construction,” or obversely, as “a kind of parallelism or isomorphism” wherein bodies and cities are seen as “as analogues, congruent counterparts in which the features, organization, and characteristics of one are reflected in the other.” These two models are inadequate, argues Grosz, for the relation between cities and bodies are neither “causal nor representational” but are more akin to what she defines as an interface:

a model of the relations between bodies and cities which sees them, not as megalithic total entities, distinct identities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or microgroupings. [... A] fundamentally disunified series of systems and interconnections, a series of disparate flows, energies, events or entities and spaces, brought together or drawn apart in more or less temporary alignments. (Kindle 1.24)

This mutual shaping of urban form and bodily flesh is true not only in terms of the diverse forms of affect, desire, and visual experiences of the city as they are mediated by the demands of capitalism, the movement of crowds, and the ever-changing networks of publics and counter-publics<sup>4</sup>, but also in the ways in which the built environment channels bodies into spaces of

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<sup>4</sup> In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner argues that counterpublics are, by definition, “formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion. Mass publics and counterpublics, in other words, are both damaged forms of publicness, just as gender and sexuality are, in this culture, damaged forms of privacy” (63). Counterpublics are in effect forms of public engagement, speech acts by disenfranchised communities who have been excluded from public discourse.

work, leisure, and domesticity. In this re-articulation of both bodies and spaces, Grosz tackles the problematic issue of boundary creation, the “lure of binarism” (Soja qtd. in Sibley) that is the “urge to sort and divide into simplified categories which still contributes significantly to the shaping of social space” (239). Gail Weiss similarly argues against such simplistic spatial binaries, arguing that the city unites the built environment and the bodies of its inhabitants in a dynamic of doing and undoing of meanings, activities, and potentialities, thereby subverting the naturalization of both bodies and spaces. She suggests that the city “unifies, weaving together disparate gestures, movements, bodies, and situations into a dynamic fabric of meaning that must be continually reworked, made and unmade” (Kindle 1.30). This is especially true in terms of how bodies “out of place” are coded as undesirable—as forms of danger and pollution to the fantasy of the well-ordered city, but obversely, how the spaces of leisure and consumption become sources of danger to marginalized subjects. Helwig’s novel shows how the city is a collection of parts and inter-related systems that incorporate both physical structures—Toronto’s underground subway system and its ravines—with bodily populations (the individual, the crowd, and hidden homeless traversing the city in unseen paths and networks). Concomitant with an experience of the city as a source of danger and defilement is the sense of material, psychological, and moral “fallenness”—spatially represented in the ravines where the socially fallen take shelter, or in the streets of Vancouver’s notorious Downtown Eastside, where homeless squatters and vagrants endlessly shuffle along its streets seeking out their next meal. Jennifer Bonnell argues that “a connection exists [...] between perceptions of the river valley as a marginal space at the edge of the city and its function as a repository for marginalized people” (2).

Much recent critical work has examined the importance of physical and moral pollution and how it has shaped (often by its very omission in discourse), societal structures, institutions, and psychological and embodied constructions of self and community throughout history. Beginning with studies of the rules, interdictions, and rituals around food, the body, and sexuality in “primitive” societies and in religious texts, notions of the pure and the impure come to define activities, places, and individuals through their symbolic inclusion and exclusion. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas argues “pollution ideas relate to social life. [...] some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order” (3). Dirt does not exist in and of itself, but is deemed so because it is simply matter out of place: “it exists in the eye of the beholder. [...] Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is a by-product of a systemic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (44). The dirty, the abject, the sullied, refuse, detritus—all suggest a categorical separation between the desirable and the undesirable—whether in terms of physical matter (bodily excretions, the waste products of industrial production, and unwanted populations) or in terms of their psychological or symbolic associations. In *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, Cohen and Johnson show how residual matter—its uses, management, and cultural representation—has shaped everything from urban design, social housing, economic policy, and imperial expansion and management since the beginnings of industrialization and urbanization in 19th century Europe. Building upon the work of Douglas on the pure and the defiled, Kristeva’s conception of psychological abjection, and Stallybrass and White’s theorization of the transgressive possibilities of the proper and improper in high and low distinctions of social class, Cohen and Johnson argue that the ascription of impurity on individuals and whole populations (working class or colonial subjects, for instance) allows a privileged ruling class to exclude, both

materially and symbolically, that which it deems dirty or defiled, showing “the bourgeois ‘obsession’ with filthiness and stench, embodied in health campaigns and the miasma theory of infection, both as a justification for surveillance and control of the poor and as a means of consolidating bourgeois identity itself (by endlessly repudiating its denigrated other)” (xx). But Cohen and Johnson offer up a liberatory politics of filth in suggesting that the re-valorization of abject materials and populations may provide a counter-discourse to the “clean” ordering of the city: “[filth] can serve as a resource and a rallying point for the organization of new types of community—even if it is a community bound in its abjection” (xxiv).<sup>5</sup> In the literature of poverty and homelessness, we often see this counter-discursive and subversive re-valorization of the unclean and the cast-off as forms of resistance to spatial and social hierarchies.

The work of Gartner and Helwig show that contemporary Canadian cities are not always the well-ordered safe havens we imagine them to be, but are rather complex, multilayered spaces of risk, bodily danger, economic dispossession, and social alienation. Gartner’s “City of My Dreams” evokes the environment of millennial malaise and panic just before the year 2000, instigated by fears that computer systems would stop functioning and global catastrophe would ensue. There is a “distinct layer of worry” throughout the city: “global warming, El Nino, the next ice age, [...] cattle hormones, keloid earth, growth fatigue, mutant minerals [...]. The beaches seemed dirtier too. E-coli counts rose and people went into the water at their own risk” (249). Gartner’s Vancouver is a city of hip yet empty globalized culture, deluded artists, and nature “fascists,” according to Lewis, its protagonist, who experiences alienation and urban panic in the uneasy conjunction of the vertical city’s sleek condo towers that “defy the landscape” and the urban grit of the city’s streets below. Vancouver is the postmodern city par excellence—both

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance: DePastino, Todd. *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (2003).



non-place<sup>6</sup> and everyplace, a city of transit that sits at the edge of the continent and stands in for all other cities, as Douglas Coupland and other have remarked. In his introduction to *Vancouver: The Postmodern City*, Paul Delaney argues that “the rapid change and growth of this city have always been the product of external forces: Vancouver has been discovered, developed—colonised, some would say—by global migrations and shifts of capital” (1). This is not to say that the populations, capital, culture, and mediated images that flow into this city on the edge of the continent does not sediment into a sense of the “distinctiveness of the local experience” (Delaney 1), but, as can be seen in Gartner’s story, this “belatedness” creates a sense of dislocation, alienation, and ironic distancing from a city characterized by “excessive openness to movements that originated elsewhere” (1). The writing that comes out of Vancouver reflects the city’s stark contrasts: colonial settler outpost ensconced in magnificent natural settings (Wilson), a city built by the promises of prospecting in the early 19th c. and of real-estate speculation in the 20th, but also a city divided by a racialized topography<sup>7</sup>, rendered infamous for its homeless “problem”<sup>8</sup>. It is also a city constantly under construction, as neo-liberalism’s unfettered advances claims ever-more spaces for development and market capitalization. As David Harvey has noted, this makes it increasingly difficult for ordinary citizens to defend their “right to the city,” since the forces of market-oriented gentrification and neo-liberal governance have led to the rampant privatization of public spaces.

For Gartner, Vancouver is a city divided between an urban elite who occupy safe, clean spaces high above the streets and those who dwell below, exposed to all manner of urban

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<sup>6</sup> In *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Marc Augé defines non-places (*non-lieu*) as “space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (77). Non-places are places of transit and anonymity (airports, hospitals, prisons) that are devoid of historical inscription and thus of individual and collective memory.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* (1995), Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990), and Wayde Compton’s *49th Parallel Psalm* (2002).

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance Evelyn Lau’s *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* (1989) and Timothy Taylor’s *Stanley Park* (2002).

dangers and contaminants. After losing her job as program director for one of the city's film festivals, Lewis scrambles by working in an artisanal shop that sells environmentally responsible products. Each day she cuts out colourful wedges of chocolate and vanilla scented soaps that "smelled good enough to eat" (238). A young, visibly homeless girl with green hair comes into the shop one day and scoops up the "apple-mint face mask," which she paints onto her face, transforming herself into a kind of modern-day urban warrior. Each day the green-haired girl returns to the store to sample the vats of creams and jellies and soaps, and when a shocked customer notices what she is doing, she moves away from the "intruder" in fear, as though "her hunger was contagion, or that in her dreadlocked rapaciousness she might actually take a bite of her own clean, lightly perfumed flesh" (256). The homeless girl is seen here not only as a drain on society (an historically common construction of homelessness) but, in Gartner's cynical vision, as cannibalistic predator of the flesh of the desirable citizen. This scandalous act elicits in Lewis "a little tribal beat in the vicinity of her heart. Something deeply carnivorous and sinewy. [...] A clue to her city?" (239). A few days later, the young girl makes another appearance, this time scooping out the green avocado face mask, and "spooning (it) into her mouth with the wooden ladles that were used to mush the stuff into containers" (248). Lewis imagines the street urchin's insides "smooth and poreless and glowing with health while flies buzzed in and out of her algae-covered dreadlocks" (248). This striking reversal of inside and outside, surface and depth inscribed upon the body of the young woman, symbolizes the tension between the fantasy of the clean, ordered city and its more tainted realities. Hunger, want, and dispossession become the bodily hinge or interface upon which the physical space of the commercial city is read, rendering in very stark relief the chasms between the monied elites and the normally invisible homeless. The ostensibly green and environmentally friendly products, which sell the fantasy of

sanitized and socially responsible urban existence, is in fact poisoning the homeless girl who has no way to feed herself. Lewis pictures her “in the stainless steel bathroom of a hospital ward desperately gulping generic shampoo from a little bottle while she showered, or gnawing on bars of soap under the thin covers of her cot” (257). Ingesting these toxic materials manifests the immediacy and desperation of hunger for a certain segment of the population of the city, but also symbolizes the desires on the part of the larger population to be cleansed of its own complicity in the continued existence of unwanted populations of homeless and the social and material filth which they come to symbolize. The soaps become a fetishized commodification of urban order which the more well to do residents of the city are able to purchase and thus feel “holy” (249). Even to Lewis, selling the sweet-scented soaps was “a balm to her besieged senses” (247), for she feels an almost visceral fear of urban contamination, and her fascination with the public restrooms of Paris, for instance, not only signals the urban dweller’s desire to live free of the dirt which surrounds her, but evokes the never-ending battle between the clean and unclean, seen and obscene, pure and defiled: “there were ancient, subterranean ones, moist like caves, and modern, nuclear-age looking cylinders set along the boulevards [...] (which) automatically washed and dried you” (246).

The City of Glass is one which forgets its own history, symbolized in the story by an old abandoned house inhabited by homeless squatters that is slated for demolition in order to build “yet another salmon-stucco sixplex” (252). Lila, Lewis’s leftist activist friend who loved “things that were sprawling and messy and about to fall apart” (252), stages a protest campaign to save the house from demolition. Rapid development in Vancouver inevitably means the eradication and erasure of the city’s Edwardian past, but also the displacement of the city’s poor and homeless populations for the sake of real estate profit and gentrification. But Gartner’s critical

eye turns not only to city officials who let this happen, but also to Lila who declares, rather maladroitly, “This is our past. This is us. Ich bin ein Edwardian house!!” (252). The protestors themselves are described as “chubby suburban teenagers [with a] rumbling hunger for something authentic” (253). In Gartner’s ironic vision of urban activism, the protest turns into a kind of “happening” where cake is served and protestors can pat themselves on the back for a job well done. Just as the upper middle classes and urban hipsters can feel good about buying environmentally friendly, fair-trade products while turning a blind eye to the social inequalities in their own city, here the protest is presented as a well meaning yet ultimately empty gesture. The homeless invariably remain silent and silenced, out of view.

Lewis remembers a particularly traumatic event which occurred in her previous job, when a woman with a “lived-in look in her eyes” entered her office and set herself on fire when her film was not chosen to be part of the festival program. After the firemen leave and a shaken up Lewis makes her statement to the police, she notices clumps of fire retardant all over her office, “it was an optimistic pink, like fibreglass insulation, like cotton candy” (243). These bright, cheerfully artificial substances, like the artisanal soaps, suggest the ominous dangers of modern-day consumer society, where polluting substances are ingested, inhaled, and spread upon the surfaces of the skin. Lewis finds refuge in her cousin’s high-rise apartment in the west end of the city, in the “only residential building in the entire city that was earthquake ready” (243). She feels an immediate sense of comfort when she arrives at the entrance to the building, with its sign on the door: “Entercom: enter calm.” Her cousin had made the apartment disaster-ready, with 10-gallon kegs of water stored in closets, emergency candles, batteries, and canned food. Pressing her body up flat against the glassed wall, she has a commanding view of the entire city and of Burrard Inlet, which has been so central to the city’s development: “it seemed as if she were

actually floating in the air over the inlet over the Taiwanese tankers filled with Polish sailors, over the glowing heaps of slag and slime and sawdust, over the whole twinkling mess down there” (258). This view of the city reveals that escape from urban pollution is ultimately untenable, for concomitant with the rarefied atmospheres of privilege and wealth are the disavowed spaces of dirt, disorder, and residues—the bodily residues of others, the cast-offs of industry, and the residues of capitalism itself—excess labour which is sacrificed to the streets. No matter how hard they try, the elite classes can never fully be free of dirt. At the end of the short story, a cataclysmic earthquake shakes the city, and Lewis makes her way frantically through its streets in order to save the homeless green-haired girl. Making their way back to the relative safety of the Entercomm building, Lewis thinks “the thing to do, would be to lock the door and wait for the city to crumble” (265).

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Toronto has often been fictionalized as a moral urban landscape, its topography characterized by the uneasy tensions between its ravines—symbolizing its psychological and social underbelly (seen, for instance, in Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*), its physical infrastructure that dwarfs human scales and makes legible the immigrant labour that has too often been placed under erasure (as in Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*), and finally, a city whose colonial heritage and more contemporary global reach are interrogated by its racialized and de-classed citizenry (seen, for instance, in the work of Austin Clarke and Dionne Brand). Maggie Helwig’s *Girls Fall Down* depicts Toronto as an organic machine, a collective body vulnerable to the ruptures, hesitations, and break-downs inherent to all systems—its numerous forces, energies, and

pulsations constituting parts of a circulatory system propelled by the demands of global capitalism and by the aleatory movements of desiring, fearful, and sometimes needy bodies. This system of circulation extends to all strata of the built and natural environments—from the clean, hermetically sealed spaces of its skyscrapers above to the underground spaces of its subway below. A breakdown in the system—ostensibly a poison gas attack which occurs suddenly in the city’s underground subway—is paralleled by the breakdown of human bodies as they are infected by pollutants, scarred by urban violence, and infected by disease. This systemic failure extends to global locations: from the propitious fall of the stock market which evidences the inherent risks of capitalism, the collective panic over terrorist attacks which show the instabilities of global geopolitics, to the avian flu epidemic and other forms of contagion in the contemporary world which undermine bodily and national boundaries.

The narrative trajectory of the novel traces Susie-Paul’s search for Derek, her intellectually gifted schizophrenic twin brother who has gone missing for several months in the urban landscape of Toronto. She is aided in her quest by Alex, an ex-boyfriend with whom she hesitantly rekindles a relationship. Susie’s doctoral research is an analysis of the spaces of need in the city, and her dissertation on “relationship networks among homeless and underhoused” (45), is mirrored not only by Alex’s photographs of homeless subjects, but by the map of Toronto which hangs over her desk, with its “annotations of green and red ink, a scatter of shelters and homeless communities—the Scott Mission, Seaton House, the cardboard neighbourhood under the arc of Bathurst” (155). The random points, lines, and vectors of movement on the map, which quite literally pinpoints homeless encampments in Toronto, make legible that which is usually hidden from view. As opposed to the mainstream assumption that the homeless are “somehow outside the social world,” Susie maintains that they also have

“Hierarchies. Networks of acquaintance. [...] people they love” (57). The map also evokes the elaborate, detailed drawings which she found in her gifted yet troubled brother’s room when they were children: “there was this magic thing about him. Something [...] so bright and strange and pinned to his bedroom wall—and I never understood hard science, but they were really beautiful. The structure of things. He understood that” (146).

Alex is a photographer who is ironically losing his sight to the ravages of diabetes: “floaters” in his vision representing “tiny hemorrhages [...] stress-induced explosions of the proliferating blood vessels” (152). The diabetic blood which poisons his bodily integrity parallels the poison gas leaked into the subway system and in a larger sense, to the corrupting excesses of capitalism which concentrates wealth in the higher social and physical strata of the city while leaving the spaces below bereft of material and social comforts. This is seen, for instance, in the photographs of homeless men living in the ravines of Toronto which Alex captures with his “cannibal eye” (50): “blurry shapes of men in sleeping bags among the twisted piles of old machinery” (136), in Derek’s meagre home, a tent “pitched under the last wall of the underpass” (138), and the discarded objects that he collects, including books that are “a singularly pressing requirement, the one thing left that resembles his vanished life” (149). The city is here an assemblage of parts that marry the physical city to its socio-economic flows and to the urban flesh of its citizenry; the homeless must survive at the peripheries of social space, taking up residence in the shadow of the city proper, linking capitalism and its residues with representations of an underclass whose proximity to material remnants also marks them as useless and residual, as social excess. It is, as Vojcek, a volunteer at a church soup kitchen explains, evidence of the “terminal stage of capitalism” (163). As Zygmunt Bauman argues in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*, global populations of the poor have become the

“residues” of late modern capitalism and globalization, citing as examples the designed redundancy of consumer products as well as the redundancy of an excess labour force visible in unemployment lines, in homeless populations, and in the growing rubbish-heaps of the third world upon which the world’s poorest populations depend for survival: “to be declared redundant means to have been disposed of *because of being disposable*—just like the empty and non-refundable plastic bottle or once-used syringe [...]. [R]outinely, people declared ‘redundant’ are talked about as mainly a financial problem. They need to be ‘provided for’—that is, fed, shod, and sheltered” (12).

When a bomb goes off in a nearby restaurant, rumours circulate that it is part of a terrorist plot or organized crime, more evidence of the “municipal malaise” (163) of increasing senses of anxiety and imminent violence in a city that “used to be all about manual labour [...] making things, tangible things. Now, it’s all service industries” (199). The dis-embodiment and dematerialization of capital in the globalized city is accompanied by an intensification of material and bodily disruptions and displacements of public space toward its peripheries and depths, into the hidden spaces of poverty and need. As David Harvey makes clear, urbanization, especially in its contemporary neo-liberal form, “has played a crucial role in the absorption of capital surpluses, at ever increasing geographical scales, but at the price of burgeoning processes of creative destruction that have dispossessed the masses of any right to the city whatsoever” (37).

By day, Alex is employed in photographing patients in a hospital emergency room, and slowly becomes inured to the horrific images of the injured patients whose bodies are torn open by violence or accidents. He is haunted, however, by one burn victim whose entire body is exposed, as the flesh was burned away in a vicious assault: “fire flays the skin, stripping it back off the muscle in brittle charring” (126). The patient must be protected in a hermetically sealed



environment, pumped with fluids and antibiotics, and if he lives would be “mapped with scars like a lunar surface” (126). The dangers of the urban landscape are here made legible upon the surfaces of the skin, which is no longer able to protect the self from exposure to the outside world. Alex’s camera eye also captures meat being packed up by a man at a butcher’s stall in the St Lawrence market, as he plays with “the contrast between the slick deep redness of the steaks and the thin and papery skin on the man’s gnarled hands” (120). The proximity of bodies thus represents risk, danger, and fear, not only for the burn victim, but also for the population of the city at large as it is exposed to larger and larger networks of circulation.

The first girl to “fall” from the poison gas attack is a “shining privileged girl with glossy hair, bright enough, well-meaning” whose innocence is first corrupted by the advances of one of her teachers, “her thigh still feeling intangibly damp where the geography teacher had put his hand on it after class” (36). Helwig plays upon and reverses the notion of the “fallen woman,” from the biblical Eve who is revealed at the end of the novel to be the hidden, hooded figure who spray painted the word “FEAR” all over the city, to the young prostitute who infects Derek, described as a “strung out child with a push-up bra and a chronic cough and track marks, [...] and undiagnosed foetal alcohol syndrome” (172). When she is suspected of being the first to introduce the mysterious illness to the homeless population of the city, she is no longer a faceless street-walker but “a vector;” an unpredictable variable in a complex urban order: “the desires of the street move so strangely, so covertly, and they follow no reliable pattern” (173). It is an element of randomness, disorder, and chance “moving the authorities in a way now that it never could before” (172). Here, the failures in the system that had until now been hidden from view (the homeless, the dispossessed) come back to haunt the ordered, everyday world—they are a

shock to the system. As opposed to the image of Toronto as a “city that works,”<sup>9</sup> a clean global nexus of capital, information exchange, and multicultural acceptance, Helwig’s novel reflects the sense of anxiety that emerges from the proximity of bodies—where danger is both imaged and real—emerging in the uncertainty of everyday life in a city connected to all other parts of the world: “Across the city, harmless bacteria passed between individuals, carried by airborne particles or traces of saliva or the touch of a hand, our lives marked always by the proximity of others” (128). The natural response to this suffocating bodily proximity is the desire for cleanliness, order, and protection from a dangerous outside, seen in the “anxiety purchases” of a scared population expecting catastrophe: “vitamin C and ginseng tablets, plastic gloves, anti-bacterial handwipes” (10), or in commuters who ride the subway with white masks over their faces, or in Mrs. Takamura, Alex’s neighbour, who obsessively attempts to rid her lowly basement apartment of contaminants, “her hands red and raw, scrubbing the stairs again and again [...] she would think of [...] some tiny particle borne towards her, [...] some flake of poison, of illness, of malign intent” (119). But the system also attempts to “cleanse itself” when it is under attack. The “bloated figures” of the Hazmat teams, “in papery white suits, [...] breathing through masks, holding up instruments with dials and lights” (14) appear each time a new incident in the subway occurs. Fear and anxiety also invade the media and public discourse, as images of victims are replayed over and over again on the news, eliciting public panic and fear (72). The city then is not only a physical system that resembles the body under duress, but also

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<sup>9</sup> The epithet of Toronto as “a city that works” was first mentioned by Anthony Astrachan in *Harper’s* magazine in December, 1974, and refers to the city’s rapid expansion, urban development projects, and the efficiency of its services. It is interesting to note that the positive tag line about the city endured despite the fact that the article is fairly critical of the many problems which plagued the city at the time (and arguably, still do), including the “battlefield of warring jurisdictions” within the city, and the ethnic tensions that lie “beneath this surface happiness:” “class as well as racial divisions may also disturb the Toronto peace. Ethnic who can’t escape from poverty are also doubly alienated” (18).

exhibits its psychological components—mirroring the collective anxieties that overtake us, the psychology of the crowd which disrupts an ordered public sphere.

In *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, Arjun Appadurai argues that the increasing flows of populations, mediated images, and information technologies have chipped away at the traditional authority of the state and given rise to a new form of “uncertainty” that “create profound doubts about who exactly are among the ‘we’ and who are among the ‘they’” (5). The consequence of this globalized uncertainty is increasing violence that becomes “one of the ways in which the illusion of fixed and charged identities is produced, partly to allay the uncertainties about identity that global flows invariably produce” (7). This violence is evident in military interventions, genocide, and contemporary forms of global terrorism that results from the “clash of civilizations,” which Appadurai examines. Violence manifests itself because of the “anxiety of incompleteness” or impossibility of social closure, and is accompanied by “a surplus of rage, an excess of hatred that produces untold forms of degradation and violation, both to the body and the being of the victim” (10). One may argue that this increasing violence is also evident at the smaller scale of the city, where forms of constraint, control, and violence against troubling bodies is the response to a desire to maintain social, economic, ethnic, spatial, and gender hierarchies. Increasingly, the nation is permeable to the influx of foreign capital, migrant populations, and political and social discourses, creating new networks of influence across national borders. It is thus increasingly porous and permeable to potentially dangerous *otherness* of migrant populations as a result of globalization, in terms of class difference seen as threatening to an urban elite, or in terms of the body itself, increasingly put at risk in the biopolitics of moulding bodies and subjectivities in the state’s efforts at control

and social cohesion.<sup>10</sup> To conclude, urban danger in these texts are not only linked to bodily risks to marginalized subjects in public space, to the invasion of noxious external contaminants on their embodied and psychological selves, but also to the more far-reaching risk of breakdowns in social systems of care, solidarity, and mutual aid.

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault defines biopower as “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species” (*Security* 1). The policing of national borders is a form of *biopower* that also operates at the level of individual bodies in the internalized fear of contaminating others.

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