

The Urban Condition

Literary Trajectories through Canada's Postmetropolis

Edited by

Eva Darias-Beutell

Series in Literary Studies



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Chapter 1

The Urban Condition of Canadian Literature

Eva Darias-Beautell

When approaching the subject of the urban, it is useful to be reminded of the original definition of the ancient *polis*, which includes not only the actual structure, function and space of the city-state but, most crucially, the relationships among its citizens.¹ It is that emphasis on the social politics of urbanity that Hannah Arendt retrieved and examined in *The Human Condition* in order to explore the possibilities for political action in the mid-20th century. The “human condition,” Arendt clarifies, differs from the “human nature” in that the former is not an essence but a state of being, subject to fluctuations and transformations and engaged in social, political and cultural modes of living in the world (Arendt 1958, 9-11). Arendt’s understanding rests on a relational ontology that, for Jean-François Lyotard (1979), became a privileged mode of constructing knowledge in the post-industrial era as a result of the crisis of the metanarratives of progress and the development of technological forms of communication based on the principles of performativity and plurality. Lyotard’s “postmodern condition” refers to those changes as well as to the attending proliferation of small, often conflicting, narratives of the world. It involves a rejection of fixed meanings, redefining the relationship between object and subject, and embracing a fluid, highly mobile and subjective mode of knowing and relating to any sphere of human activity. Intrinsic to these apparently unrelated two *conditions*, the relational aspect of spatial experience must figure as a crucial element in any investigation of contemporary urban life. It is an essential part of what we could call *the urban condition*, for, while the city as social text may no longer offer a coherent paradigm, having been co-opted by various modes of consumptive discourses, the notion of the *urban* still “remains in a state of dispersed and alienated actuality, as kernel and virtuality” (Lefebvre 1996, 148).

In *The Architecture of the City*, Aldo Rossi undertakes a process of production of knowledge about the city based on analogy, putting forward an alternative

mode of articulation that, departing from the factuality of urban artifacts, undermines the Euclidean perspective by adopting an intuitive approach to them. Rossi's "analogous city" hinges on the relationship between memory and place, and is thus the product of the collective imagination of the city dwellers (Rossi 1984, 130). In its promotion of "unexpected meanings" (15), the analogous city "is in essence the city in its diverse totality" (18); it thus creates new realities of the urban that turn the city into a multiplicity of potentially transformative spaces.² For Henri Lefebvre (1991), as well, the city's "lived" spaces depart from both the "perceived" (practical) and the "conceived" (theoretical) approaches to the city in that they are produced and accessed through the imagination. These approaches make of literary representation a vital feature in the process of production of urban space. If, as Yi-Fu Tuan asserts, a major function of literature is "to give visibility to intimate experiences, including those of place" (1977, 162), then, an interdisciplinary analysis of literary modes of production of urban spaces may open new and promising articulations of being in the world. The city being "a center of meaning, par excellence" (Tuan 1977, 173), it seems possible to look at urban literature as an analogue city; that is, as an imaginative and practical instance of the potential of the *lived* city (Lefebvre 1991).

This collection of essays provides an interdisciplinary articulation of the representation of the urban in contemporary Canadian literatures in English. It examines the centrality of the city in recent literary production from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives, in the belief that this type of work can produce not only an alternative picture of the national literary tradition but also fresh articulations of the relationship among (Canadian) identity, citizenship and the nation. If in the field of critical urban studies, scholars use the term *urban restructuring* to describe the drastic transformation that many metropolitan regions of the world have gone through since the 1960s (Soja 2000, xii), in Canada, this book implicitly argues, this phenomenon has been accompanied by a *literary restructuring* of its canon, largely consisting of a gradual shift of focus from the wild or the rural to the urban. The term *postmetropolis* in the book's title is inspired by Edward W. Soja's seminal work of that title (2000) and alludes to the nature of those changes in contemporary cities. Special attention is given to Soja's notion of *synekism* or "the stimulus of urban agglomeration" (3), by which he means that cities, apart from being places for the production and accumulation of capital, are also important sites of creativity and innovation, extremely dynamic places of technological and cultural advances. Additionally, the term initially locates the work's shared theoretical framework within a critical postmodern paradigm, although each individual essay will then push that initial framework forward, suggesting the need for new tools of analysis and interpretation. Covering a

specific area of research in the field of urban Canadian literature, each essay discusses a particular selection of poetic and/or fictional texts. Without meaning to be exhaustive, the book's scope is somehow representative in terms of geography (the Canadian cities covered), the issues analysed (surveillance, asylum, diaspora, affect, mobility, architecture, glocalization, the queer, the digital, and the post-political), and the interdisciplinary methodologies used. The high level of interconnection between essays underlines the volume's conceptual and thematic coherence.

The choice of Canadian literature as the primary field of investigation is not arbitrary or fortuitous. Many contemporary Canadian novels are in fact urban novels, set in a Canadian city and narrating an urban experience. Much poetry written in Canada in the past forty years is equally concerned with what we could call an urban subjectivity. Yet, that Canada is an urban country was traditionally effaced from public discourses, national(ist) mythologies and sanctioned critical approaches to English Canadian culture until the 1990s, which had, in turn, revolved around wilderness tropes, the small-town imaginary and the metaphor of nordicity (see Ivison and Edwards 2005; also Caulfield and Peake 1997). Some critics now believe that the emphasis on the natural has not only created an important gap between the average Canadian reader (often an urbanite) and Canadian literature, but also consistently ignored an important body of urban literature produced in Canada since the beginning of the 20th century, and very prominently, after the 1960s. This collection of essays attempts to address that issue and contribute to filling that gap by means of four interrelated critical strategies. In the first place, the essays that follow confirm and analyse the centrality of the city in contemporary Canadian culture and its implications in terms of global/local identities, citizenship and national grounding in the 21st century. Secondly, they articulate key elements in the various representations of the city in Canadian literatures in English in the last few decades. Thirdly, they study, retrieve and assess an important corpus of texts as paradigmatic of the present process of literary restructuring of the Canadian tradition. And, finally, they trace fruitful lines of connection and intersection between literature and urban studies.

That the city has become a privileged site of negotiation between global and local forces does not escape critical discourses in Canada today, where a gradual move towards the urban and an interest in the analysis of the intersections between the urban and the cultural seem expanding. That is part of what has been called the "turn to the city," a process in which literature has had a major role and is increasingly being seen as a field for the examination of those cultural, social and political transformations (Edwards and Ivison 2005, 8-9). This book joins, therefore, a collective project initiated

at least two decades ago and marked by the publication of a few significant works that explicitly address the shift towards an urban aesthetics in Canada. In cultural studies, for instance, the exceptional collection *Vancouver: Representing the Postmodern City*, edited by Paul Delany (1994), breaks ground with its approach to Vancouver as a world city somehow detached from the rest of Canada as well as with its interdisciplinary, cross-cultural methodology; yet it remains an isolated initiative until the following decade.³ In art criticism, John O'Brian and Peter White's *Beyond the Wilderness* (2007) effectively deconstructs a model of nationhood based on the painting aesthetics of the Group of Seven by presenting and discussing the art of prominent post-1960s artists who look questioningly at the natural landscape and challenge the traditional wilderness myths, "offering counter-narratives and counter-images of a 'post-wilderness' landscape and its social relations" (5). Of special note is also the collection *Literature and the Glocal City: Reshaping the English Canadian Imaginary* (Fraile-Marcos, 2014), featuring original essays on the topic of urban literature in Canada. But the most comprehensive study to date is perhaps Justin Edwards and Douglas Ivison's groundbreaking collection *Downtown Canada* (2005), which also provides one of the first attempts "to assert the centrality of the city and the urban within the Canadian spatial and cultural imaginaries, to help us see the city as a place of Canadian society and culture, including its literature" (4). Invariably drawing on critical alliances between the spatial and the textual, and addressing the centrality of the city from a variety of perspectives, these collected essays succeed in achieving the editors' double objective of "shift[ing] the focus to that most placeless of places, the city," and "providing the grounds for a literature and a criticism that can engage with the global without losing sight of the local" (6). The volume is deliberately post-Fryegian, and its basic assumption is that a literary approach to the cityspace and its citizens can elucidate fresh articulations of the relationship between Canadian identity and the Canadian nation. This book implicitly follows the *Downtown Canada* direction.

In the larger context, a number of works may be said to have influenced the changing vision of the relationship between the urban and the textual. Richard Lehan's analysis of the centrality of literature in the production of cities and vice versa, in *The City in Literature* (1998), has been essential in the articulation of the critical field as an archeological practice (260-268). Likewise, Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974) has been instrumental in looking at space not as a given but as produced, the product of social, cultural, economic and affective practices. The approach is taken up and further extended by Doreen Massey's book *For Space* (2005), which opens with three major propositions that define space as relational ("it is the product of interrelations

[...], from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny”), plural (it is conceived as “the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity [...] in which distinct trajectories coexist”) and processual (“space is always under construction” [9]). The result of applying these three ideas to the study of space, writes Massey, is “a space of loose ends and missing links” (12).

Working with these ideas involves a methodological shift, by which neither the object of study nor the research results are ever completely circumscribed or stabilized. Relational space brings forth “intensively cross-referencing disparate planes of experience” and thereby demands “Technologies that can be twisted away from addressing preexisting forms and functions” (Masumi 2002, 192). In relational architecture, for instance, the occupants’ intervention in the architectural design is encouraged to utopian limits, making the building change to meet their concerns. Many doubt the feasibility of this type of project, although, as Nigel Thrift says, “The extent to which this is necessary is another point” (Bech, Borch and Larsen 2010, 101). What seems integrated in contemporary research practices in many fields is a notion of space as an important site for the articulation of local, national, and global subjects, since it both produces and is produced by very unstable meanings of identity. Because the notion of spatial beings means that we shape as much as are shaped by the spaces and places we live in and share with others, these spatial theories are also deemed essential in the development of new interdisciplinary modes of reading literature. The multiple possibilities of the methodological frameworks built around the connections between literature and the spatial are still to be defined.

This book’s methodological framework intends then to be double-forked. On the one hand, it is poststructuralist in its base, since the research presented here owes its force to the work of key theoreticians who have been interested in the spatial dimension of subjectivity and loosely located within that label. The following essays are indebted to Michel Foucault’s study of the multiple, uncanny intersections among knowledge, space and power, to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s articulation of the rhizomatic shape of experience, to Jacques Derrida’s positing of the dislocating, supplementary, textual structure of subjectivity, and to Judith Butler’s notion of performance and its relation to the (gendered) body. All those themes deal in one way or another with the spatiality of human life (and, by extension, of literature); as Doreen Massey puts it, in deconstructive practices, space is temporalized, for “changing the ‘e’ to an ‘a’ adds time to space” (49).

On the other hand, there is a deliberate methodological overlapping with some theories that seem to push the poststructuralist critique of knowledge to its own limits, suggesting the possibility of escaping the self-reflexive labyrinth and articulating a notion of culture that can function “as a symbolic

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Contributors

Silvia Caporale-Bizzini is Professor of English at the University of Alicante (Spain) where she teaches 19th-Century and Contemporary British Literature. Among other works, she has edited *Narrating Motherhoods, Breaking the Silence: Other Mothers, Other Voices* (Peter Lang, 2006), and co-edited *From the Personal to the Political. Toward a New Theory of Maternal Narrative* (with Andrea O' Really; Susquehanna UP, 2009), and *Teaching Subjectivity. Travelling Selves for Feminist Pedagogy* (with Melita Richter; Stockholm University, 2009; Italian translation *Soggetti Itineranti*, Firenze: Albo Versorio, 2013). She has also published essays and chapters in *Women: A Cultural Review*, *The Atlantic Literary Review*, *In-Between*, *The Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, *Critical Essays on Don DeLillo* (G.K. Hall, 2000) or *Terrorism, Media and the Ethics of Fiction* (Continuum, 2010). Caporale has worked on migrant subjectivities and the representation of spaces as identitary emplacements in contemporary writing in English. She is actually researching the discursive representations of the intersection of contemporary identities vs neo-liberal senses of self, precariousness and the discursive construction of poverty as represented in neoliberal society.

Eva Darias-Beautell is Associate Professor of American and Canadian literatures at the University of La Laguna (Spain). She has been Visiting Scholar at the Universities of Toronto, Ottawa and British Columbia. Her books include *Shifting Sands: Literary Theory and Contemporary Canadian Fiction* (Mellen, 2000) and *Graphies and Grafts: (Con)Texts and (Inter)Texts in the Fictions of Four Canadian Women Writers* (Peter Lang, 2001). She has co-edited (with María Jesús Hernández Lerena) *Canon Disorders: Gendered Perspectives on Literature and Film in Canada and the United States* (U de La Rioja P, 2007), and is the editor of *Unruly Penelopes and the Ghosts: Narratives of English Canada* (Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2012). Dr. Darias-Beautell has directed six fully-funded international research projects on Canadian and American literatures, with a focus on the issues of multiculturalism, literary theory, urban literature, gender and the canon. She currently leads the international research network "TransCanadian Networks: Excellence and Transversality from Spain about Canada towards Europe" (FFI2015-71921-REDT) and is the co-principal investigator (with María José Guerra Palmero) of the research project "Justice, Citizenship and Vulnerability. Narratives of Precarity and Intersectional Perspectives" (FFI2015-63895-C2-1-R).

Jeff Derksen is the Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies at Simon Fraser University, where he teaches in the English Department. His research resides at the intersection of geography, cultural studies and cultural practices with a focus on neoliberalism, urbanism, and globalization. His critical books include *Annihilated Time: Poetry and other Politics*, *After Euphoria*, *How High Is the City*, *How Deep Is Our Love* and his poetry books include *The Vestiges*, *Transnational Muscle Cars*, *Dwell, Until*, and *Down Time*. Derksen was a research fellow at the Center for Place, Culture, and Politics and is a founding collective member of the Kootenay School of Writing. He works with the artists Sabine Bitter and Helmut Weber in the research collective Urban Subjects: their bookworks include *Autogestion, or Henri Lefebvre in New Belgrade*, *Momentarily: Learning from Mega-events*, *The Possibilities Are*, and *The Militant Image Reader*.

Ana María Fraile-Marcos is Associate Professor at the University of Salamanca where she teaches English Canadian and Postcolonial Literatures. She is the director of the USAL Master in Creative Writing and the Head of the English Department. She is also a Lorna Marsden fellow at the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, York University (Toronto). Her publications include *Literature and the Glocal City: Reshaping the English Canadian Imaginary* (Routledge 2014), *Planteamientos estéticos y políticos en la obra de Zora Neale Hurston* (2003), *Richard Wright's 'Native Son,'* ed. (2007), and numerous chapters and articles in peer-reviewed journals. She is the Principal Investigator of the research project "Narratives of Resilience: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Literature and Other Cultural Representations" (FFI2015-63895-C2-2-R).

Isabel González Díaz is a Ph.D. lecturer at the University of La Laguna (Spain), where she teaches U.S. Literature. Her research interests include gender and cultural studies, with a special focus on life narratives. She has published various articles on life writing and gender, on feminism and cultural studies, and on transgender narratives. She is currently involved in the research group "Justice, Citizenship and Vulnerability: Precarious Narratives and Intersectional Approaches."

María Jesús Hernández Lerena is an Associate Professor of American and Canadian literatures at the University of La Rioja (Spain). She is author of the books *Exploración de un Género Literario: Los Relatos Breves de Alice Munro* (1998), *Short Story World: The Nineteenth-Century American Masters* (2003), and co-author of *Story Time: Exercises in the Study of American Literature for Advanced Students of English* (1999) with Julieta Ojeda and James Sullivan. She has also co-edited the volume *Canon Disorders: Gendered perspectives on Literature and Film in Canada and the United States* (2007) with Eva Darias-Beautell. She has published essays on American and English short story

writers as well as on Canadian authors such as Alice Munro, Carol Shields, Douglas Glover, Katherine Govier, Barbara Gowdy, Lisa Moore, etc. Her edited book *Pathways of Creativity in Contemporary Newfoundland and Labrador* came out in 2015. She has recently organized seminars on visual culture and on the relationship between literature and social justice.

Aritha van Herk is the author of five novels, *Judith*, *The Tent Peg*, *No Fixed Address*, *Places Far From Ellesmere*, and *Restlessness*. Her non-fiction ranges from *In This Place: Calgary 2004-2011* and *Prairie Gothic* (photographs by George Webber, words by Aritha van Herk) to *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta*, and *The Age of Audacity* (a history of the University of Calgary). Her most recent work, *Stampede and the Westness of West*, melds poetry and place-writing. She has published hundreds of articles, reviews and essays. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, member of the Alberta Order of Excellence, and recipient of the Lorne Pierce Medal, she has been honoured as one of the twenty-five most influential artists in Alberta.

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