"That city, that self": Tracing a Historical Trajectory of the City Writer

CEILIDH HART

Abstract: This article traces a historical trajectory of the city poet in Canada—a writer whose "street-level perspective" defines their methods and shapes their authorial personae—from the nineteenth-century through to the twenty-first. It first provides a brief exploration of some of the literature published in the Toronto *Evening Telegram* newspaper in the 1880s and 1890s to consider the origins of a literary tradition and an authorial persona rooted in the city. This part of the article uses the example of Robert Kirkland Kernighan to show the way early writers exploited the opportunity provided by city newspapers and the city itself to map and define themselves in artistic and professional terms. The article goes on to consider the work of contemporary city writers like Bren Simmers, who continue mapping themselves onto the street in sometimes deeply personal and increasingly unsettled ways. At base, the article argues that by extending critical discussions of urban writing back to its nineteenth-century roots, we can better understand how the city works as a unique marketplace for literature and a unique cultural economy through which literature circulates, but also as a unique context for the creation of authorial identity.

Contributor biography: Ceilidh Hart is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of the Fraser Valley. She studies and teaches a range of literatures in Canada, and her recent scholarly projects have focused on the work literary scholars do in the classroom. For example, she was an assistant editor for the award-winning CanLit Guides project, an open-access, peer-reviewed teaching and learning resource hosted by the journal *Canadian Literature*. In 2012, she received the Marie Tremaine Fellowship from the Bibliographical Society of Canada. Currently, she is an Erasmus+ Exchange Scholar with the European Union.

In April 1883, a late-spring snowstorm threw the city of Toronto into chaos. That week, in his regular column in the *Evening Telegram*, Robert Kirkland Kernighan (aka The Khan)—at the time, Toronto's most famous poet—published a poem titled "Whoa and Swindlin," in which he describes the scene at a particularly muddy street corner following the storm:

> T'ronto's dirt on every dud,
> All filthy lay the seas of mud.
> And dark as winter was the scud
> of gutters rolling rapidly. (1-4)

On a spring evening more than 130 years later, poet Bren Simmers tracked a walk through her neighbourhood in Vancouver's northeast end, mapping swing sets as she did so, and then translated that map into poetry for her 2015 long poem *Hastings-Sunrise*. Although they stand at opposite ends of the country, and are separated by more than a century, what Kernighan and Simmers have in common is their intense "street-level" perspective; theirs is a poetics defined by the cities in which they are situated. More than comprising their subject matter and informing their methods, the city for these writers also defines their authorial personae. These are writers for whom the Canadian city helps substantiate their writerly identities, and their work allows us to consider not just the key role the city has played in the development and production of Canadian literature, but in the production of Canadian *authorship*.

Literary criticism that focuses on the city in Canada is not new: urban literature has recently been described as a "boom area" in CanLit (Smith 154). We can see evidence of this growing scholarly trend in periodicals (including *Studies in Canadian Literature*'s 1998 special issue "Writing Canadian Space" and *Canadian Literature*'s 2017 special issue "Concepts of Vancouver"), monographs (such as 1998's *Concrete Forest: New Fiction of Urban Canada* and 2005's *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities*), and reflected in teaching, too (Germaine Warkentin's course "Reading Toronto" at the University of Toronto, Peter Dickinson's "Vancouver Writing" course at the University of British Columbia, and my own special topics course on "Urban Literatures in Canada" at the University of the Fraser Valley). As the study of urban literature and the related fields of public poetics, activist literature, street poetry, and the creative city continues to expand, there is a noticeable tendency to divorce "early" Canadian authors from the dynamic ways contemporary writers engage—through the city—with local issues, thereby negating the role early writers played in shaping the worlds around them. As a case in point, the *Downtown Canada* collection of essays on urban literatures in Canada focuses only on literature after 1921 and pays particular attention to contemporary poetry and prose. Yet, the volume's editors insist, "we need to foreground the role that the city has long played in the production of Canadian literature, a role that is usually elided in Canadian criticism" (9).

It is true that Canadian authors have long had a dynamic relationship with the city. Early writers were acutely interested in urban spaces and urban issues, belying the still-pervasive idea that Canadian literature, especially in its early forms, is predominantly rural.[1] This "defeaturing of the landscape," as Richard Cavell describes it, rests in the "notion that Canadian literature has a deep and abiding relationship with the land," a notion that has "governed criticism of Canadian literature (generally thematic, but also more avowedly theoretical) for the last half century, largely to the exclusion of critiques relating to literary systems as urban institutions" (14). In fact, there exists a substantial body of what could be called "urban writing" published well before the turn of the century. Kernighan is a good case in point. To find his work, though, we need to look at the city newspaper; however, the challenges of accessing newspaper literature from the nineteenth century in Canada are not small. They include problems with preservation, access, and curriculum development, to say nothing of the shifting cultural value placed on this body of work, all of which make it difficult to see how the city has historically shaped Canadian literature.

By extending critical discussions of urban writing in Canada *back* to its nineteenth-century roots, we can better understand how the city works as a unique marketplace for literature and a unique cultural economy through which literature circulates, but also, as I suggest in this article, as a unique context for the creation of authorial identity. The Canadian city offered as much room for writers to define themselves—both creatively and professionally—in the nineteenth century as it does today, with our contemporary focus on urban aesthetics. Despite the difference in the attitudes these writers sometimes adopt, and the mediums they use to disseminate their work, there is, then, a coherent trajectory to be drawn linking early city writers like Kernighan with contemporary writers like Simmers. It is a trajectory that reveals the way early writers exploited the opportunity newspapers provided to make a place for themselves as they wrote themselves onto the map of the city, and the way contemporary writers continue mapping themselves onto the street—if in increasingly unsettled ways. In what follows, I offer a brief exploration of some of the literature published in the Toronto *Evening Telegram* newspaper (1876-1971) in the 1880s and 1890s to consider the emergence of a literary tradition and an authorial persona rooted in the city. I then offer another brief consideration of Simmers as a contemporary writer who belongs in that tradition and extends from those roots.

In her book *Imagining Toronto,* geographer Amy Lavender Harris explores how writers have historically shaped and defined the city of Toronto. Early authors did more than write the city, however; in doing so, they wrote themselves. Beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the city itself offered an opportunity for writers to define themselves as

[1] See Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison's introduction to *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities* for a full discussion of the way urban spaces have been left out of Canadian criticism.

such and the city newspaper was a key vehicle for this work, focusing as it did on local interests. In his comprehensive study of late nineteenth-century newspapers, *A Victorian Authority*, Paul Rutherford shows the increasing hold the daily newspaper was gaining on cities across the country. By the late 1870s, for example, the circulation of dailies had increased by approximately 150 percent—a remarkable growth that was especially evident in the cities (66). Politics, labour issues, reform thinking, social trends, all found articulation in the cities' daily newspapers and their cultural significance was profound (Rutherford 232). This was particularly the case for the Toronto *Evening Telegram* whose commitment to popular journalism, and whose declared aims to represent Toronto and Toronto citizens, is seen explicitly through the 1880s and 1890s. It was an approach, historian Ron Poulton suggests, that had a profound effect on journalism in Canada: "[Editor John Ross] Robertson's methods and innovations caused a metamorphosis in the city's administration, and in Canadian journalism. There was a depression, and his reporters canvassed businessmen about the economy. An heresy trial was in progress, and clergymen of every denomination were interviewed. These opinion polls were startlingly new to a public that had rarely been consulted about anything" (77).

In fact, Hugh Graham, the editor of the *Star* (1869-1979), had been doing much of this with his daily paper in Montreal years before the *Telegram* entered the market and other papers were following suit.[2] The aim these papers pursued in representing their local communities applied not just to their news reporting, but to their literary offerings, too. Like other city papers in Canada at the time, the *Telegram*'s project was to speak for the city and it endorsed those poetic voices that reflected its aims and interests. By dedicating generous space for Toronto writers, the paper supported, even facilitated, the careers of a number of professional writers: Isabella Valancy Crawford, Robert Awde, John Imrie, in addition to Kernighan. But the paper also made space for local amateurs. In fact, it was common for nineteenth-century papers to print original literature and common practise for editors to highlight these original contributions with subheadings and additional commentary. "For the Telegram" or "For the Recorder," for example, were regular introductions to the literature they printed. The *Telegram*'s section "Amateurs and the Muse," a regular feature from 1891 that showcased the work of local amateurs, or "embryo poets" as the paper described them, is a good example of the way the paper's literature sections reflected the editor's popular approach to journalism. Again, the combination of popular journalism with an intense focus

[2] Rutherford notes that these changes can be attributed to increasing competition between papers and to the influence of the popular style of New Journalism prevalent in American papers, a style marked by sensation, scandal, and special features that appealed as much to working class readers as to middle- and upper-class readers. Minko Sotiron finds the same thing: by the turn of the century, competition between papers was such that publishers' strategy for increasing revenue was "pleasing audiences." As Sotiron explains, "For the first time the typical newspaper was exciting to read: screaming headlines, breathless stories, the latest fiction, and features to interest every member of the family" (5).

on the local community had important implications for local writers: the paper created a community of readers who were rooted in the city, a ready audience for the literature the paper published, but also an audience that increasingly expected to read about local interests, current events, and popular issues.

The extent to which the *Telegram* opened the door for local writers can be seen in the way it quite emphatically established a public role for the poet in Toronto. Two regular poetry sections that were prominent in the 1880s and 1890s underscored both the paper's local mandate and its view of the poet as someone who could speak for the city itself: "Toronto City Idylls" and "Khan's Konceptions: Ballads of the City and the Times."[3] The first, "Toronto City Idylls," started appearing in 1882 with the caption, "A series of poems on social subjects, grave or gay, by Dr. Mulvaney,[4] written for *The Telegram*." If Mulvaney often took a popular story from another newspaper as prompt for his poems in "Toronto City Idylls," the second regular section, "Khan's Konceptions," was even more concerned with Toronto exclusively. The author, Hamilton-based poet Kernighan, was well known for his poetic portrayals of rural Ontario, but in the writing he did for the *Telegram* his focus was entirely the city of Toronto. One good example is the Khan's 10 April 1883 poem "Help for the Heathen," dedicated to "the Presbyterian Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, whose annual meeting was held to-day." The poem on its own reads like a relatively abstract meditation on women's moral authority, but the dedication at the beginning to the Woman's Missionary Society orients readers in the city of Toronto, invokes a Toronto community, and reminds readers of the important social work in the city that was gaining momentum at the time.

In his most engaging *Telegram* poems, the Khan makes effective use of satire to expose the corruption and other misdoings of elected officials. Given Robertson's goal to do the same thing with his paper generally, and given his contempt for the railroad companies specifically, it is easy to see how a poem such as "The Grand Trunk Juggernaut," published Wednesday, 25 April 1883, underscored and reinforced the paper's editorial position:

> Might has triumphed, sound it well,
> Through all the land from east to west!
> To William Barclay and John Bell
> Are due our grateful thanks the best.
> Then sing aloud
> A pean [sic] proud,
> The Grand Trunk Juggernaut is king.

[3] The Khan's poetry also appeared under the heading "Khan's Korner."
[4] Charles Pelham Mulvaney (1835-1885) was a frequent contributor to Canadian periodicals and was also a Church of English clergyman.

> Right is vanquished; once again
> The iron wheel will crush the life
> Of guileless children, women, men,
> For slaughter we are ever rife.
> Then what care we,
> Who've cash plenty.
> The Grand Trunk Juggernaut is king. (1-14)

What was new here for readers, and was common in the Khan's poetry, was the explicit naming of those local political figures with whom he was taking issue. The *Telegram* was a vociferous opponent to what it saw as the deep-rooted corruption of the large railroad companies. Here, the Khan identifies John Bell, legal counsel for the Grand Trunk Railway, and William Barclay McMurrich, mayor of Toronto in 1881 and 1882 and a sympathetic ear to the interests of the railway company, as part of the corruption whose effects, Robertson insisted, were damaging to the city and to the country as a whole.[5] The timeliness of the Khan's poetry and the specificity of his satiric targets suggest that "Ballads of the City" acted in the 1880s the way the newspaper's later political cartoons would. The volume of poetry published in the *Telegram* that offered comment on current issues shows just how popular a model this was. "The Fisheries Question" by Robert Awde on 1 November 1878, "The License Bill" by the frequent contributor A. on 28 May 1883, and "The Sad End of Toronto Toboganner," by G.R.K. in February 1887, are just three of many good examples. In all of them, the city is the focal point and, in expressing popular feeling about a particular issue, the poet does the work that largely defined the nineteenth-century editor's job, particularly as Robertson saw it: exposing corruption and the foibles of city officials, celebrating local citizens of note-worthy achievement, and so on.

Importantly, and despite the fact that "The Khan" often reads like a mouthpiece for Robertson's editorial position, this relationship served Kernighan as much as it did Editor Robertson. The paper was a space for him that was both creative and professional. "Ballads of the City" appeared frequently in the *Telegram*, often several times a week, and the immense popularity of their author was evident when Kernighan gave a lecture to a packed house in Albert Hall in Toronto in 1885 (*Toronto's Daily Amusement Record*, n.d.). His popularity in the city shows how much the newspaper could help a writer establish an

[5] Robertson was careful to always present his opposition in the paper as being representative of a broader Toronto community—especially the "guileless children, women, men" who are cast as victims in the poem. The position he cultivated for the paper as speaking for the city with regard to the railroad issue in particular could also be seen on Friday, 13 April 1883, when the *Telegram* printed a signed petition against the railroads using the Esplanade area of the city's waterfront and urging city councilors to step in and enforce greater control over them. The petition included thousands of names and ran through eleven columns, filling almost two full pages.

audience.[6] Clearly, readers would have looked for the Khan's poetic comment in the wake of any significant political happening in the city; Editor Robertson wisely ensured he gave readers what they wanted. Again, the role the newspaper itself played in creating this opportunity for writers cannot be overemphasised. Not only did the paper provide writers with a ready, interested, and invested audience, it also largely furnished them with their subject material by being, already, that place where local issues were foregrounded and worked through. In this context, then, the city, the paper, and the writer were inextricable from one another.

The example of the Khan is an important one: despite Kernighan's own successes outside of his relationship with the *Telegram*—he published a number of volumes of poetry over his lifetime[7]—it was the *Telegram* that confirmed his status as poet of the city. And his was a role others would occupy over time. The position Greg R. Frankson (aka Ritallin) held as House Poet for the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) Toronto radio program *Here and Now* from 2012 to 2014 is one example. Like Kernighan's mandate, Frankson's as House Poet was to offer poetic comment on current Toronto issues in his regular spot "A Weekly Dose of Ritallin."

It is important to note that the authorial persona that was enabled by the newspaper's new focus on the city, a focus so evident in the writing in the *Telegram*, was equally an opportunity for women writers as for men.[8] Through the 1880s and 1890s, well before the period scholars tend to identify with the rise of urban and city writing in Canada, women writers whose work appeared in the *Telegram* showed new and significant engagement with civic issues. As women writers increasingly reached beyond the subjects that had previously defined their work, they also reached beyond definitions of authorship that reinforced those boundaries. Evidence from the *Telegram* in these last years of the century suggest, for example, that women were more comfortable negotiating the economics of writing as a profession, acknowledging forthrightly their desire to make money from their creative writing without recourse to traditional ideas about femininity and authorship. A poem by "Judy," titled "The Poet's Confession" and published on 7 May 1895, blatantly "confesses" the poet's interest in writing for profit:

[6] Carole Gerson uses the example of travel writer Emily Murphy to show that women journalists, in particular, used the newspaper to attract a strong following, which could later result in considerable book sales, and we can see the same pattern among creative writers, too.

[7] See, for example, *The Khan's Canticles* (Hamilton: Spectator Printing Company, 1896), *War Poems* (Dundas, ON: R.W. Karch, 1916), and *The Khan's Book of Verse* (Toronto: Evening Telegram, 1925).

[8] The connection between women's rising presence on the literary scene and their involvement in public life, including social reform movements, has been well documented by scholars such as Janice Fiamengo, Heather Murray, and Mariana Valvderde, but when the newspaper has been considered as a unique publishing venue, it has most often been considered in light of journalism and women's non-fiction prose.

With my nose to the grindstone of duty,
I sing you a song for a fee,
And though it may not be a beauty,
'Twill make little matter to me.
For I sing for the sake of the money,
And not for the sake of the art,
And though the songs may not be funny,
'Twill still make an editor "part."

I will stir you to amorous passion,
Though chaste as Diana myself;
Or I'll bawl in the patriot's fashion,
'Tis purely a question of pelf.
I will e'en sing a hymn if you're willing,
Devoutly as any divine,
And the charge by the time is a shilling—
'Tis cheap at a shilling a line.

When I write about wine I am witty,
But wittier still, as I think,
When I knock off a temperance ditty
In order to pay for a drink.
I can sing of the joys of the "beano,"
I can sing of the choir boy who died;
Though at these I am not very keen-o
Still I'm certain I could if I tried.

So give your poetical order,
You have not a moment to lose;
You will find me a faithful recorder
Of any emotion you choose.
With my nose to the grindstone of duty,
I'll turn the thing out in a trice,
And if it should not be a beauty,
Well that's the result of the price.

Read against the sentimental and didactic poetry that was also published in newspapers by her literary predecessors not much earlier, Judy's poem shows a disarming forthrightness, as she makes explicit her inspiration ("I sing for the sake of the money, / And not for the sake of the art") and her methodology (her "nose to the grindstone of duty.") She eschews traditional, even romantic notions of the poet, and interrogates the typical ways women had defined their creative work and framed their writing personae. When she cheekily claims that she pays for her drinks with her "temperance ditt[ies]," she undermines the moral authority on which many women historically based their writing endeavours and illuminates women writers' interest in making a living by their pens. The newspaper framing Judy's poem reinforces her interest in profit; as Carole Gerson, Susan Coultrap-McQuin, and others have shown, women more easily found their work published in the periodical press of the nineteenth century, a venue that more reliably promised financial returns for poetry specifically.[9] Judy defines the "professional" poet as a particular kind of producer and the poem as a particular kind of commodity, circulating through a distinct cultural marketplace defined by the city's boundaries. Because she is able to produce what publishers want, she is able to get her price. The work she performs—the product she delivers—and her reasons for doing this work have strayed very far from those of her literary predecessors, who rooted their poetic voices in a sense of their own moral authority grounded in their gender and who claimed their work for the public good. Taken together, the creative writing by women that appeared in nineteenth-century Canadian newspapers is evidence of the significant change not just in the subject matter women writers were engaging, but also in the way they saw and presented themselves as authors. What we see is an emerging sense of women writers as professionals, in many cases using the city as a doorway as they increasingly grounded their personae in a conception of the writer as public spokesperson for the city. And, as it was for their male counterparts, the newspaper was the important platform from which they could launch their attacks at elected officials, city hall, and elsewhere, address those issues that mattered to them and their readers, and build an audience for their work.

The street-level perspective so evident in Kernighan's writing in the *Telegram* and the writing of other nineteenth-century authors published in the daily newspapers in Canadian cities can be seen in many contemporary poets whose work is also rooted in the city: Chelene Knight, Alex Leslie, Sachiko Murakami, and Meredith Quartermain, to name just a few. Although the medium has changed for them, publishing as they do in monograph form and in literary journals, these authors, like the city poets before them, bring sustained attention to their immediate urban surroundings. It is an attention described by Ben Hickman in his study of several urban poets as a practice of making "what is there (as Other, as an apparently

[9] As Gerson notes, books offered prestige, periodical publishing more consistently offered pay (69).

external nature, as seemingly unassailable social fact) newly here, animated, related, and responsive" (87). One key strategy used by contemporary city writers to enliven their urban surroundings in this way is the trope of *mapping*. Over and over again we see city poets not only identifying individual local places in their work but mapping (sometimes literally) their way through city spaces. Hickman sees a similar pattern in walking, what he calls the "organizing metaphor of routes" (87), which is related to mapping and has its own long history not unconnected with urban poetics. But as Maia Joseph points out in her discussion of Quartermain and Lisa Robertson, their walking is significantly different from that of the traditional figure of the *flâneur* because, among other things, these poets belong to the streets they observe (166). Thus, while mapping helps establish the local context for these poets in the same way the newspaper did for earlier writers, the maps these writers produce can be deeply personal. In Murakami's 2011 collection *Rebuild*, for example, Vancouver is reimagined as a labyrinth and the search the poet takes through its streets, disorienting for their constant upheaval, leads ultimately and devastatingly to her own father. In Knight's 2018 book *Dear Current Occupant*, walking maps of a city neighbourhood appear alongside photographs of street names, mailboxes, and rental houses in downtown Vancouver. These visual elements of the book punctuate poems named after places Knight lived growing up, with titles such as "apartment 301 near the low track" and "white house where some family lived upstairs."

In order for their political messages to land, nineteenth-century city writers in Canada relied on their readers' recognition of the spaces, people, and events they described and the context provided by the city newspaper, which helped orient readers. Such writing evokes the "place-based consciousness" described by Sarah Banting in her discussion of contemporary urban novels. For Banting, "place-based consciousness" is an understanding on the part of readers that comes "only with longstanding, embodied life in their Toronto and Vancouver settings" and "cannot quite be acquired through more distant ways of knowing" (115). In Banting's terms, "*distance* is an index of a reader's relative access to different kinds of place-knowledge: an index of what a reader might find more or less 'intelligible' in a novel's description of its setting" (118). Contemporary city poets, however, whose work often maps the self as well as the street, cannot take for granted the "place-knowledge" or "intelligibility" of a diverse readership. Even when they provide detailed descriptions of hyper-local sites, and even when a reader is familiar with the street, neighbourhood, or building being described, recognition is always somewhat unstable. The references to feet and shoes in Murakami's poems about Vancouver,[10] for example, or the idiosyncratic descriptions of buildings that Quartermain paints, are good examples. In both cases, readers are challenged to consider what they know. And so, while the poetry I describe

[10] This is a reference, I think, to the phenomenon of feet and shoes washing up on Vancouver's beaches in recent years.

may be seen, like that of Ritallin, as having been "ripped from the headlines" ("A Weekly Dose"), it can also be alienating to readers "on the outside," so to speak. These particular, hyper-local references expose readers' distance, to use Banting's terms again. But I argue that recognition, or lack of recognition, in this poetry, has a political inflection that relates to the way contemporary writers map themselves, even as they unsettle their place on that map. Like Murakami, who seems intent on disorienting readers even familiar with Vancouver, these writers force readers to see the city anew.

The defamiliarisation of what is familiar, the unsettling of what aims to be settled (through strategies such as mapping, for example) reveals the self-consciousness about place expressed by many contemporary city poets. This prevalent self-consciousness, a feature of contemporary city poets not seen in their literary predecessors, is evidence of a long overdue awareness of whose voices have the privilege of speaking for the city—and of being heard. Although their sense of place is intense, it is troubled as they interrogate their own engagement with the city and express unease about their public role. Murakami's awareness of "land taken there, taken again / from another family," for example, points to the complicated politics of place that provides no easy answers for Japanese Canadians displaced by a racist, colonial government from Indigenous ancestral territories ("Boundaries," 5-6). If these poets differ from the traditional figure of the *flâneur* because they belong to the streets they describe, then, as Joseph argues, they also differ from the *flâneur* in the extent of their "self-critique" (154). Joseph describes the ambivalent space occupied by contemporary urban artists, who may be unintentionally implicated in processes of gentrification and the aestheticisation of otherwise "unmarketable" or "undesirable" (155) urban spaces.[11] Yet, however much contemporary city writers differ from their predecessors in their unease with representing their local communities, Joseph reminds us of the centrality of the street to the urban poet: "while a degree of complicity in processes of urban restructuring may be inevitable, the street remains a necessary space of inquiry and action for many artists invested in urban ethics and politics" (156).

These patterns of mapping intensely local spaces, of locating oneself on those maps, while simultaneously grounding one's poetic voice and expressing discomfort in those spaces, are all features of Simmers's 2015 long poem *Hastings-Sunrise*. *Hasting-Sunrise* focuses on and takes as its title Hastings-Sunrise, an old working-class region in Vancouver's northeast end. Simmers's book is entirely bounded by the 12 x 13 blocks of this neighbourhood. The table of contents makes this explicit; rather than listing section titles, it maps out street names (albeit "not to scale"), in their proper geographic orientation. The contents of the book, then, is the city, the neighbourhood, itself. While the book addresses

[11] The implicit cultural capital brought by the artist's attention is ironically evident in a current condominium development on Queen Street East in Toronto called The Poet. This luxury development boasts proximity to musicians' studios and artists' lofts and will sell from 982,000 to well over one million dollars.

many issues, including the complexities of family relationships, the desire to belong, the collision of the urban and the natural worlds, these issues play out on the streets of Vancouver. Following the logic laid out in the table of contents, Simmers continues using elements of mapping and concrete poetry throughout the book, blurring the line between poem and space as she does so. "Map of Open Doors," for instance, locates the open doors in her neighbourhood on one summer night, those attended marked "(a)" and those unattended marked "( )" (34). The intense attention to detail here, and the evocative quality of these wordless signs, point to something intangibly connected to the poet's feeling of community as poem and map are collapsed.

Yet, as I said, the book does not just bring street-level attention to Vancouver, it also locates Simmers's own writerly identity in the city she describes. In an interview with Sheryl MacKay on the CBC radio program *North by Northwest*, Simmers talks about the first section of the poem, "Landscape," as a kind of map itself, setting the intention for the book and anticipating some of its turns. Here, the speaker compares her work as a naturalist to the work she does in this book: observing, recording, bringing naturalist observation to her urban environment. By the end of the section, though, she belies her ostensibly "observer" position when she admits, "my life reflected in what / I choose to record" (11). From here, and throughout the book, we see the conflation of the poem with the street that I discussed just earlier, but we also see the writer entangled in both. "That city, that self" (73) the speaker insists in one poem: the "landmarks in our mental maps shift" as the city shifts and changes. "These streets," she discovers, "my own almanac" (73). In another example, "Map of Neighbourhood Routes," the poet again moves beyond street-level observer, mapping her own presence onto the map-poem: "book box route" (marked with b), "errand route" (marked by e), "park route" (marked by p), and "home" (marked by X) (74). If the map and the poem blur, so too do the city and the speaker. More than a vivid description of urban space, then, the poem reveals an understanding of the poetic voice itself shaped by that space.

In an interview with *Quill and Quire*, Simmers talks about "neighbourhoods as extensions of ourselves" and describes the process of "connect[ing] my surface observations of the neighbourhood to my process of making a life there … I was forced to create a character sketch of myself that found a balance in both narrative voice and specific details. The challenge was being able to tell my own story rooted in a time and place." Simmers is thus more than the "urban geographer" she poses as in "Map of Christmas Lights" and these other poems. Like Kernighan, her poetic persona is grounded in the city. She makes this clear in a poem identified by address ("238 N. Kamloops"). Staring at the house she covets, she invokes a history of artists and the physical places that inspired them:

> Frida had a bridge,
> Georgia had Ghost Ranch.
> Virginia, you understand, I dream of four walls. (12)

The reference to Virginia Woolf here underscores Simmers's sense of the importance of place to her professional identity and of the connection between work and the physical space in which that work is carried out. In another poem, Simmers further suggests the way her poetic identity is tied to the city as the speaker surveys her local coffee shop, watching the regulars with envy, longing to be "called out of anonymity" (18). She achieves this, remarkably, later in the poem when she realises that the woman bagging her groceries "knows my name" (71). The city, she seems to suggest, can indeed call her "out of anonymity." It provides the contours of her own identity and the line of her own poetic voice.

If we return to April of 1883 and the mess left by that spring snowstorm, we can see the way The Khan's poem anticipates the rhetoric of the unclean city that writers in Toronto and elsewhere would use increasingly in the following decades as they launched critiques of the industrial city growing at rapid pace around them. The Khan's focus on one street corner in Toronto does not prevent him from participating in larger conversations related to his contemporary moment and urban life broadly. If anything, his focus on that street corner enables his participation in those conversations. To be sure, political engagement is a key feature of the writing city authors were publishing in the nineteenth-century. In the same way, Simmers's long poem, like the work of her contemporaries, tackles capital C city issues: gentrification, fractured community, cost of living, and so on. Yet, like the Khan, she does not lift her gaze from the street. Her wrestling with these issues is perhaps most apparent in those places where her position in the city shows some unease: in one section she admits to feeling "one foot out, / one foot in" before self-consciously and problematically declaring the city "is ours to claim" (25). This gesture is at odds with her later discovery of a "rent increase notice / taped to our door" (49). These moments of unease, as I describe them, are also moments where Vancouver's colonial history reveals itself (although subtly), complicating the poet's feeling of being "at home" there. We see these moments in other writers too, where the histories of local spaces that poetic observations enliven are, as Hickman explains, "often histories of violence" (84). My point here is that the street-level vantage point these authors adopt affords them the unique insight and perspective needed to critique and question the very place they locate their own voices.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, creative writers in Canada found the daily newspaper to be a venue that accommodated them, a place more than any other in which they were able to assert themselves as authors. Towards the turn of the century, daily newspapers, such as the *Telegram*, offered writers new opportunities for civic engagement

and for self-expression. Rutherford suggests that by the 1890s (and earlier in the case of the *Telegram)* "the centre of nearly every newspaper's 'map' was the home city itself" (135). By engaging with the city in their creative work, and in publishing that work in the newspaper, writers effectively wrote themselves onto the map of the city as they simultaneously defined themselves as authors. In creating a public role for the poet in Canada, these writers also laid the groundwork for later poets who would define their methods and their writerly selves in the city. These writers would pick up the work of mapping city spaces and locating themselves on that map, but many of them do so with some discomfort that speaks to their awareness of a fraught history and a complicated city politics in which they themselves are implicated. The discomfort contemporary writers feel with the "public role" that earlier writers embraced results in a more nuanced engagement with the city and writers' place in it.

Importantly, attending to the ways the Canadian city presented a unique opportunity for writers from the nineteenth century and into the twenty-first productively removes the focus from the pervasive nation-based framework that tends to define studies of literatures in Canada. The reasons for the tenacity of this national framework are multiple and complex, but literary critic Will Smith suggests in his discussion of Toronto writing that, partly, the emphasis placed on building a "national literary imaginary" meant that the local very often got lost as a valuable consideration (168). Yet, writers and readers alike understand how significant local geographies and communities are to shaping identity. With that in mind, I suggest we can explore the *city*, rather than the nation, as a unique space for cultural production and a unique space in which to explore the role of the author in public life.

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