

REPRESENTING DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE VANCOUVER:

A Review Essay

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*The Heart of the Community:
The Best of the Carnegie Community Newsletter*

Paul Taylor, Editor

Vancouver: New Star Books, 2003. 256 pp. Illus. \$24.00 paper.

The Door Is Open: Memoir of a Soup Kitchen Volunteer

Bart Campbell

Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2001. 144 pp. \$14.95 cloth.

Heroines

Lincoln Clarkes

Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2002. 152 pp. Illus. \$29.00 paper.

DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE VANCOUVER is often referred to as “the poorest postal code in Canada.” It may also be the most activist and the most creative postal code in Canada – and, the most researched, written about, filmed, photographed, painted, drawn, and performed postal code in Canada! The three books reviewed here constitute only a tiny fraction of the explosion in representation of the Downtown Eastside in recent years. The authors of these works represent diverse positions along the ever shifting, permeable and perpetually contested insider/outsider continuum that borders the vexing concept “community”; and each volume addresses audiences similarly imagined as socially and spatially both near

and far from the space mapped as “Downtown Eastside Vancouver.” The authors offer insights into the lives of the people who live and have lived within that geographical space as well as into the motivations of the people who elect to represent themselves and others through academic, literary, and artistic work.

The Heart of the Community is a collection of articles, essays, poems, art work, polemics, analyses, obituaries, and event notices excerpted from the *Carnegie Community Newsletter* between 1986 and 2001. Nineteen-eighty-six – and, more particularly, Expo '86 – marked a significant turning point in the recent history of the Downtown Eastside. Many of the rooming houses

that had been homes for neighbourhood residents were torn down or converted into tourist hotels to serve visitors to the World's Fair. As is also characteristic of the Downtown Eastside, residents organized and mounted a campaign to resist this intrusion and to defend their neighbourhood. Themes of exclusion, dislocation, loss, and injustice met by resistance, creativity, mobilization, and commitment link the contents of this volume, as they bind this deeply divided yet ferociously interconnected community.

The Heart of the Community is, indeed, a remarkable anthology. As well as the advance of the gentrification frontier, the years between 1986 and 2001 witnessed the arrival of crack cocaine, increasing numbers of homeless people, and an expanding survival sex industry. A study showing the "highest rates of HIV+ infection in the western world" led to the area's being declared a "public health emergency zone" in 1997. The disappearance of over sixty women and the arrest of a man dubbed "Canada's most infamous serial killer," who has been charged with many of their murders, brought unprecedented media attention. Community activists have, during the same fifteen years, succeeded in opening North America's first safe injection site for intravenous drug users, four new community clinics, and – though still far from meeting the needs – several new social housing spaces. Aboriginal people have formed new organizations that mark their unique presence, and they are demanding recognition not only of their historical roots in the land/place but also of their distinct stake in the community's future.

The Carnegie Community Centre, from its location at the corner of Main and Hastings Streets, has been at the centre. Newsletter contributors

witness, create, criticize, debate, and celebrate neighbourhood history, and the newsletter serves as a chronicle, archive, and organizer. Sandy Cameron, a frequent contributor, writes in a 1991 editorial that "the *Carnegie Newsletter* overflows with the liberating power of self-definition (47)." A few examples illustrate Cameron's claim:

Cuba Dyer's *Haiku for a Downtown Eastside Friend*

A man of means indeed
To still have toilet paper so late
In this five-week month

shares a page with Tora's comic-strip character "Downtown Eastside Duck," who contemplates how to use various kinds of human waste productively (23).

Pat Chauncey's scathing critique,
Take Down Your Pants And
Show Us
Your Pain While We Expire In
Our
Middleclass Postures of
Sympathy (80),

faces a touching tribute to Janice from Brenda that ends,

I'll never forget you
standing there in your apron
your smile your laugh your eyes
until we meet again
you do walk in beauty (81).

Sandy Cameron, Jean Swanson, Dan Feeny and others provide critical analyses of the relationships between drug treatment initiatives, poverty, and globalization. They also editorialize about tensions between outside experts – including writers, academics, and artists – and grassroots organizers. This is a book to which you can return, and from which you can learn something new each time you pick it up.

The *Carnegie Newsletter* is the product of volunteers, and volunteers are important members of the Downtown Eastside community. Some are local neighbourhood residents, while others come from elsewhere to offer their time and energy.

Bart Campbell's *The Door Is Open* is based largely on his diary entries, which were written while he worked two shifts a week at a Christian mission – The Door Is Open – that serves meals and provides free clothing and some solace, primarily to chronic alcoholics living in the Downtown Eastside. Campbell describes how he began to volunteer while experiencing a painful separation from his wife and children, and while facing a personal crisis that had him questioning the meaning of his life.

The Door Is Open's ten chapters cover topics also addressed in *The Heart of the Community*: poverty, drugs, prostitution, crime, sex, grief, government policy, private profiteering, courage and cowardice, humour and sorrow, brutality and compassion, insiders and outsiders. Campbell interweaves anecdotal descriptions of encounters at the Drop In and other spots in the neighbourhood, media reports, government studies, and reflections on his personal struggles as a witness who wrestles with compassion, frustration, and judgment. He writes frankly about the confusion he often experiences when, in turn, he becomes angered and/or disgusted by the people he works with, by those he works for, and by those who have the power to alleviate suffering but choose not to.

Writing this book six years after he leaves the Drop In, Campbell is convinced that his subsequent reconciliation with his family and the resolution of his existential crises “probably never would have happened if I hadn't started hanging out at The

Door Is Open and let the experience change some of my entrenched outlooks on life, and teach me some things – like that often the best way to help yourself, is by helping others, and that the more you give of yourself, the more you forget yourself in work or in love, to that extent you will become happy” (II). Campbell has created an account that is true to himself and that speaks to the paradoxes and contradictions that emerge in a search for personal solutions to private and public problems.

Lincoln Clarke's *Heroines* is doubtless the most controversial of the three books reviewed here. *Heroines* consists of 105 black-and-white photographs of local women taken in various locales, including allies and doorways, street corners, and cafes in the neighbourhood. While the women's poses and Clarke's photographic style are those of fashion photography, these women are not the usual subjects of that genre. Clarke has been criticized for exploiting and objectifying the women he photographed, for aestheticizing and commodifying despair, for pandering to the voyeuristic desires of a public hungry for sensationalist spectacle, and for promoting his own professional career at the expense of impoverished and drug addicted women in Downtown Eastside Vancouver.

The author's bio blurb on the back of the book describes Clarke as a self-taught photographer who has specialized in portraiture and fashion, and who has lived and worked in London and Paris. For the last twenty years, his address has been Strathcona, an old and rapidly gentrifying residential neighbourhood included within the boundaries of Downtown Eastside Vancouver. He is the father of two grown daughters, the bio concludes.

Clarke introduces his collection with a short story about his own

experience of helping his friend Leah – with whom he engaged in the “use – not abuse” (ix) of drugs – to detoxify from heroin use. This anecdote is accompanied by an image of Leah injecting heroin in a Vancouver bus shelter, framed by a photograph of a young, thin woman advertising Calvin Klein jeans. This clever montage of image, story, and author’s introduction juxtaposes *heroin chic* and *heroin street*, and it locates Clarkes as a member of yet another sector of the Downtown Eastside community: commercially successful, cosmopolitan artists. The anecdote ends with *heroin fatal*. Leah died of an overdose in 1999.

The 105 photographs that constitute *Heroines* are bracketed by a Foreword by author Barbara Hodgson as well as by brief essays by curator and critic Ken Dietrich-Campbell, photo collector and longtime neighbourhood activist Patricia Canning, and advocate Elaine Allan. Hodgson sketches the deeply gendered and racialized history of opium in Vancouver, and she credits Clarkes’ work with bringing “international attention to the plight of women addicts” (xiv). Dietrich-Campbell approaches *Heroines* from the perspective of contemporary art criticism. He credits Clarkes with courageously rejecting what Dietrich-Campbell calls the “70’s feminist art criticism” of Martha Rosler and Laura Mulvey, which he deems “passé,” and taking up the challenge of “a professional artist developing a committed relationship with the suffering women he had seen so many of” (115-6). Canning lauds *Heroines* as exemplary social commentary and photographic documentary. Placing Clarkes in the noble tradition of the New York Worker’s Photo League, John Grierson and the National Film Board of Canada, and Bob Semeniuk,

Canning writes “Lincoln Clarkes made more than four hundred portraits over a period of five years with the agreement and cooperation of the subjects” (122). She concludes: “In the *Heroines* portraits we also see that sometimes photography as art can offer hope in a world of suffering” (123). Allan describes the empowering effect of the photograph on one of Clarkes’ subjects and argues that, “Without question, Lincoln Clarkes’ photography has served to promote public compassion and positive action for a sector of women that our society had thought of as ‘disposable’ or simply lost” (128).

Viewing the photographs presented in *Heroines* is a disturbing and confusing experience, as many would argue that art must be if it is to deserve the name. The women appear strong, pathetic, defiant, disfigured, and beautiful. The viewer feels, inescapably, a voyeur. Looking away, though, fails to relieve the sense that one is complicit in an ill-defined, but undeniable, crime. The images stay with the spectator, refusing easy or stable interpretations of their subjects’ intentions, their messages, or the ethics of the photographer.

Like Clarkes, I am a professional – an academic – who lives in Strathcona, writes about and photographs the Downtown Eastside, participates in neighbourhood groups and activities, aspires to be a responsible and ethical member of the community, and to be successful in my own métier. I conclude, therefore, with my own reflections on the challenges raised by these three books and on the veritable explosion of scientific, literary, artistic, and academic representations of the Downtown Eastside, to which I contribute.

It is undeniable that those of us who represent “the poor” in some way make our living from the commodification of suffering. Such is the economy

of twenty-first-century consumer capitalism.¹ While we may continue to debate how to, and who should, represent *the* Downtown Eastside (and to what ends), too much focus on how people come to live there/here, on who is confined by its many interlocking borders, on who has the privilege to traverse them, and on how we can render our representational practices more ethical carries the danger of taking for granted (or ceasing to question and challenge) the inevitability of the very existence of a zone – both spatial and non-spatial – in which people live in extreme poverty relative to their neighbours: us. If, as we know, drug addiction, mental illness, exploitative sexual relations, family breakdown, and interpersonal violence span all of Vancouver's neighbourhoods and are not contained within the Downtown Eastside, then the important question is not how “we” see “them” but, rather, what differentiates “us” from “them”?

Policies set by governments elected by voters determine that income assistance rates should be set beneath subsistence levels, that low-wage labour will not support a family, that real estate development shall proceed unfettered, that rents will not be controlled, that global capital shall reign supreme, and that profit will come before people. Some of us have found, inherited, or been given shelter from the vicissitudes of the market and enjoy private protection from the public gaze. Others are overexposed.

In 1973, when the Downtown Eastside was still generally referred to as Skid Road, anthropologist Laura Nader cajoled her students to “study up” the hierarchies of power. She cautioned that in a society based on economic inequality and radically unequal political power, anything you write about poor people will be used against them.² Nader's words haunt those of us in the business of representation, and well they should. But perhaps Nader underestimated the emergence – in the thirty-five odd years since she issued her warning – of virulent “regimes of disappearance” effecting the accelerating social exclusion and “compassion fatigue” that increasingly threaten to erase from public view and consciousness the most marginalized and, thus, to create “disposable populations.”

These three books, each in different ways, refuse to erase “the poor.” The authors demand that we look. Each interrupts processes of “othering.” Each celebrates hope in the face of despair. Each confronts the complicated relationships between differently located human beings sharing the same time and place. Each seeks to build empathetic bridges. Each critiques the conditions that create the subjects of their work. *The Heart of the Community* is most successful in linking representation, analysis, political action, and aesthetics. The conditions of its production are most clearly integrated with both practical and visionary proposals for change.³

¹ Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, “The Appeal of Experience, the Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times,” In *Social Suffering*, ed. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1–24.

² Laura Nader, “Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up.” In *Reinventing Anthropology*, ed. Dell Hymes (New York: Vintage, 1973), 284–311.

³ See also Aaron Vidaver, “Woodsquat,” *West Coast Line* 41 (2003–04): 37–2–3.

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