Ryan Fitzpatrick

And Tomorrow, I'm Somewhere Else

Destabilization, Dispossession, and Dissolution in the Vancouvers of Lisa Robertson and Mercedes Eng

> Local is the name of a possibility of sharing, combined with the sharing of a dispossession.
> —The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*

In their call for papers for the recent special issue of *Canadian Literature* on "The Concept of Vancouver" (*Concepts of Vancouver: Poetics, Art, Media,* no. 235, Winter 2017), Gregory Betts, Julia Polyck-O'Neill, and Andrew McEwan evoke a stereotypical Vancouver—a "vibrant hub," a glittering mecca made *liveable* (for those wealthy enough) through ongoing and historically shaped processes of dispossession. Vancouver exists at the junction point of global capital and settler colonialism. In her narrative "Goodbye Snauq," Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle returns to the violent colonial transformation of Snauq into False Creek, her reflections triggered by a court case declaring the "sale" of Snauq between 1913 and 1916 illegal. Maracle draws archival and personal memory into a consideration of the ways that the junction of colonialism and capitalism not only displaced the Squamish peoples for whom Snauq was home, but fundamentally disrupted the relations and physical shape of the space. Located where the south end of the Burrard Street bridge now stands, Snauq was liquidated, its land appropriated through an underhanded land deal, the village burned to the ground. Maracle laments the way that "[t]he shoreline is gone, in its place are industries squatting where the sea once was" (15). This toxic transformation disrupted both human and non-human relations, turning the common "garden" (22) or "supermarket" (21) of Snauq into the garbage dump of False Creek—a site that, like many other sites and neighbourhoods in Vancouver

and elsewhere, has transformed again and again, most recently into the condo developments that dominate both sides of the inlet.

In this article, I compare two recent books of poetry invested in the ways the contemporary relations of Vancouver are broken up—dissolved and devalued to clear space to make room for something more profitable. Lisa Robertson's *Occasional Work and Seven Walks From the Office for Soft Architecture* (2003) and Mercedes Eng's *Mercenary English* (2013) both confront and critique the capitalist and colonial processes that *stabilize* and *destabilize* the material relations that compose Vancouver in the twenty-first century. Vancouver is repeatedly hailed as one of the world's most liveable cities while also being one of the most unaffordable. It is a city of condos and cranes, scaffolds and tent encampments. It is a city whose disparities are seen in the way its spaces are changed to benefit its wealthiest citizens. Robertson and Eng examine these dramatic and often violent spatial changes. In particular, they focus on the ways individual bodies are articulated—pinned down and set adrift—within and by Vancouver's shifting relations.

Over the course of this paper, I want to examine the ways that these two writers pose this version of Vancouver through drastically different formal approaches. Where Robertson takes a largely aestheticized and speculative approach, bringing twenty-first-century Vancouver into expressive proximity with the changing streets of spaces like nineteenth-century Paris, Eng cognitively maps the political and spatial structures of her contemporary moment, aiming for an articulatory realism that critiques the uneven processes that shape the city's Downtown Eastside (DTES) neighbourhood. Where Robertson speculates about the opportunities opened up for the transformation of subjectivity by urban change, Eng responds critically to the lived conditions produced through those changes. These distinctions are important to register both because of the different subject positions of the two writers and because of the fraught potentials of poetry as a form used to address the city's material unevenness.

The unevenness of a city like Vancouver is tied to spatial change and to the ways that parts of the city are stabilized and destabilized. Stability is a strange keyword. On one hand, it describes the way a space holds itself together over time. On the other hand, it also describes people's lives at more intimate scales as their lives *feel* more or less stable depending on the availability of work, housing, and support. Stability is central to Deleuzian assemblage theory, which theorizes how space is produced by spatial "actors," a category which includes not only humans, but also non-human actors and material.

Here, reminiscent of Henri Lefebvre, space is not a static container, but is instead continually produced by its relations—a continual state of emergence from the ground up. If space is constantly emerging, how do we theorize the ways it stays consistent? In his book *A New Philosophy of Society*, Manuel DeLanda argues that "[o]ne and the same assemblage can have components working to stabilize its identity as well as components forcing it to change or even transforming it into a different assemblage" (12). In this view, spatial change is not a naturalized cycle (though it can look like it), but the result of forces struggling over a space's "identity." In other words, any space can evolve as some actors reproduce the same structures while others push at the limits of what is possible. This form of spatial change is internal to a space. It is negotiated and incremental. At the same time, however, change can come from outside as a new set of relations can leverage power and capital to more swiftly and violently transform a space.

When Maracle discusses the transformation of Snauq into False Creek, it is this second form of spatial change that she is describing primarily—the "horror [of] having had change foisted upon you from the outside" (13). In *Mercenary English*, Eng wrestles with a similar dynamic as she maps the violent incursions of capital into her home neighbourhood in the DTES of Vancouver. In the interview that concludes the second and third editions of *Mercenary English*, Fred Moten asks Eng about her decision to move out of the DTES. "If the neighbourhood is the displaced," he asks, "rather than the scene of their displacement, then how and where does the neighbourhood go, or keep on going?" ("echolocation" 126). Moten poses the DTES through the relations that compose it, asking Eng to think through how the destabilization of the neighbourhood affects her geographical location by displacing and dissolving her friendships, her relations, and her support network. Moten's question identifies a tangled mix of concerns that comes out of Eng's position in the two assemblages struggling over the DTES—the lower-income residents of the neighbourhood and the wealthy new businesses and condo owners (in assembly with real estate developers, city planners, and police working to gentrify the neighbourhood). In their conversation, Eng and Moten recognize a tension around the place of the individual, who, caught in the thinning relations of a neighbourhood, finds herself left with the choice to leave or to self-gentrify by folding herself into the new relations of the incursive neighbourhood.

The work of gentrification operates through a logic where capital, looking for new territory to build on, often needs to demolish and evict, driven, as

described by Neil Smith, through a frontier logic that exploits the uneven values of different spaces in order to extract the greatest profit; a logic that resembles, in its push to eliminate one set of relations in favour of another, the work of settler colonialism. Robertson identifies this kernel in her use of "dissolving" as a metaphor when she claims, at the beginning of her book, that in the period from the 1986 World Exposition (or Expo 86) to the 2003 selection of Vancouver as host of the 2010 Olympics, she "watched the city of Vancouver dissolve in the fluid called money" (1), echoing Marx's famous remark in the *Grundrisse* that "[w]here money is not itself the community, it must dissolve the community" (224). Dissolving or dissolution poetically describes what is materially felt through the movements of money as it interacts with individual bodies and alters neighbourhoods and cities as architectures and populations shift and groups are pushed out through processes of gentrification and colonization. As a metaphor, dissolution involves the breaking apart of bonds and relations. Dissolution describes the ways that one set of spatial relations needs to be denatured before another set can take its place, like the transformation of Snauq into False Creek, through investment and disinvestment in neighbourhoods (shaped, in part, by racist practices like redlining), the appropriation and dispossession of territory, and the uneven and racially motivated application of police violence. When we read Robertson's and Eng's texts together, a tension emerges between theoretical possibilities and material realities of instability that can help us think through the potentials of poetry to transform spaces and spatial relations.

Refashioning the Body and the City in Robertson's *Office*

To think about destabilization and "dissolution," we need to think about the relationship between spatial parts and wholes, between the actors who compose the city and the city that shapes their lives. In other words, we need to ask how these two texts investigate a tension between the body and space. For Robertson, this question begins with surfaces and the kinds of things that can be "draped" over spaces and bodies to transform them. In "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto," Robertson lays out the piece's origin as a catalogue essay[1] for artists Sharyn Yuen and Josée Bernard, a context that allows her to develop a "theory of cloth, memory, and gods" that somehow pertains to "urban geography, especially to the speed and mutability of Vancouver's built environment" (4). Robertson describes the city's abstract, changing character as the fabrics that adorn it also change. Framing Robertson's work within a larger context of an urban, "cosmopolitan" poetics

in his essay "On the Outskirts of Form," Michael Davidson suggests the ways that Robertson's *Office* sees a city "not [as] the glass and steel corporate landscape of Vancouver so much as a state of transience" (749) that offers "a malleable surface to corporate modernism's seeming permanence" (750). Robertson's work, according to Davidson, connects to a larger set of poets across North America whose work *speaks* to a post-NAFTA context and an ongoing tension between those able to move across borders and those policed by them: in his words, "a world in which the illusion of mobility and expanded communication masks the re-consolidation of wealth and the containment of resistance within a totalized surveillance regime" (737).

Robertson's work imagines the ways that the city changes by taking on the conceptual persona of the "Office for Soft Architecture," a move with a potentially critical, but also deeply ambivalent relationship to capital. In his essay "The Utopian Textures and Civic Commons of Lisa Robertson's Soft Architecture," Christopher Schmidt argues that Robertson's book "inscribes the logic of global capital into its cultural production" (150) by fatally adopting the persona of a fictional star architectural firm—a literary Koolhaas who writes about the potential of temporary or *transient* architectures. Through this "fatal" strategy of critiquing capital by obscenely performing it, Robertson repeatedly turns to leisure and consumption as practices throughout her book: she and her unnamed walking guide picnic in an unnamed park, she trawls the aisles of the Hastings Street Value Village. How does this minor leisure or consumption square with the urban anxiety Schmidt assigns to Robertson? Schmidt poses embodiment as a potential answer, turning to Robertson's poetic theorization in "The Value Village Lyric" that the body can change itself at the level of fabric by remobilizing the detritus of past consumption in a practice of recycling identity. Robertson is concerned, according to Schmidt, "with the interplay between the situated and the dispersed, between the actual garment and the global semiotic system in which this garment travels and signifies" (153). In other words, with the way the garment changes the meaning of the body (or, alternately, the way the body changes the garment) depending on the assemblage around it, on how the body is perceived, received, and acted upon by the larger social field—a playful and *experimental* way to transform identity or duck surveillance.

Robertson's interest in circulating texts, garments, and bodies is reflected in her interest in the topological writing of Gilles Deleuze, who, in *The Fold* (1993), examines Leibniz's work on the baroque to analyze the relationship

between topological organization and the affective relational exchanges of the virtual. For Deleuze, subjectivity and identity are shaped by and through the movements of the social through the tension between self-fashioning and surveillance. Robertson gestures to this externality in her *PhillyTalks* discussion with Steve McCaffery, arguing against the tendency within certain psychoanalytic discourses to theorize the production of the subject as "all interiority" in favour of a Deleuzian reading of the subject as produced by its relations, figured in the spaces of the city:

> So to bring in the dailiness, the provisional local textures of becoming subject, poetry needs to become a kind of urbanism, or landscape art. I do agree. Also extending the idea of corporeality to the city itself helps avoid some of the deplorable essentialism that clings to the corpus as merely human. Lets [*sic*] talk about the agencies of matter. (33)

When Robertson poses that the concept of subjectivity needs "a kind of urbanism," she suggests that the external pull of "local textures" acts on the body and shape subjectivity not in a "social vacuum" (33) but in a complex assemblage that, possessing its own material agency, has its own corporeality. Robertson positions both the individual human and the city under the rubric of the body, making it possible for her to consider experimentation with subjectivity and experimentation with the city as two parts of the same move.

In a similar way to speculative urbanism's[2] alternate and critical stagings of a site, Robertson imagines the book and the codex as speculative sites for spatial experimentation, with the poet as the designer of these utopian possibilities. In her article "The Afterlife of the City: Reconsidering Urban Poetic Practice," Maia Joseph argues that Robertson "continually probes this threshold relation between the observing poet and the urban world—the space where, she proposes, ethical inquiry into the questions of how to live and relate to others is cultivated" (160). In Joseph's reading, Robertson describes the city in ways that create a "contemplative temporality" (160), a duration of time where reader and writer can speculate over new forms of relation. In "Time in the Codex," the essay that opens her collection *Nilling* (2012), Robertson turns to Deleuze's *The Fold* to ask about the potential of literature as a site for speculative thinking about space and identity. Robertson looks at the codex as a site to experiment with identity and to "become foreign and unknowable" to herself (13). She circles around the effects that the text has on her body through the alternate rhythms proposed by the text, rhythms that she adopts and follows, staging an encounter with the book to imagine a different field of embodied engagements.

But how to extend this speculation and experimentation to the city itself? When Robertson speaks of "extending the idea of corporeality to the city itself," she doesn't simply suggest that the city is a body with an internalized, metabolic structure, but, rather, she expresses a desire to affirm the agencies of matter in order to examine the relationships between those corporealities (not only human bodies, but also architectural structures) as they produce both human subjectivity and the identity of the city itself. In this, the city becomes an assemblage of bodies that also has an identity that can be changed through the recombinations of matter. Working with matter is tough to do in an expressive medium like poetry (unless we, as readers, somehow take Robertson into the streets ourselves). Robertson instead dramatizes material agencies through expressive means, overlaying archival representations of Vancouver and both literary and artistic representations of other spaces onto the present. In "Site Report: New Brighton Park," Robertson stalks New Brighton Park looking for signs of the archive, noting the broken cement chucks and truant patches of comfrey and mint that witness the histories of the site. Seemingly similar, she turns to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* in "Playing House" and Eugene Atget's photographs of early-twentieth-century Paris in "Atget's Interiors" to not only ask what those representations can illuminate about Vancouver's transitional nature, but also to recode our understandings of Vancouver. Why, for instance, does Robertson turn to someone like Atget, whose staged Parisian rooms seem so geographically and temporally distant from twenty-first-century Vancouver? It's certainly not to *directly* discuss Vancouver (unmentioned in "Atget's Interiors"). Instead, Robertson reflects on a variety of topics: the body, habit, emotion. She ends by proposing that "Atget's interiors chart a politics of furnishing" (203). That is, she reflects on the way the combined agencies of a room, some furniture, and a person "compose an image of time, through a process of mutual accretion, exchange, application, erasure, renovation, and decay" (204). At the same time, Atget's photographs document the classic example of a city made unrecognizable by redesign and redevelopment, reflecting Paris post-Haussmannization. At once, the photographs are stylized and archival, staged and documentary. This dialectic between the critical self-fashioning of the politics of furnishing and the worry about documenting the city before it transforms defines Robertson's approach to Vancouver. Draping Vancouver in this version of Paris allows Robertson to frame her own work in the same sad tones—the Office at work describing a city in the process of dissolution—but it also carries the speculative potential to allow us to rethink Vancouver's identity by asking how it compares to Paris' transformations.

Robertson's investment in obsolescence and spatial fragility lands at the feet of the body, expected both to refashion itself and its spaces with the leftovers of the world (adopting the role of Benjamin's Parisian ragpicker) *and* to find a kind of hope in the city's instability, an instability tied to the repeated incursions of capital and the state across a space. Perhaps ironically, Robertson valorizes the precarious position of the individual living in unstable conditions—in a shack, a tent, on a scaffold, in a state of permanent transience. In her treatise on the scaffold in *Office*, Robertson proclaims that "[a] scaffold sketches a body letting go of proprietary expectation, or habit, in order to be questioned by change," ending by clearly advocating, on behalf of the Office, for the scaffold as an ideal place to inhabit: "As for us, we too want something that's neither inside nor outside, neither a space nor a site. In an inhabitable surface that recognizes us, we'd like to gently sway. Then we would be happy" (141-42). Robertson's happiness pitches itself into the future (*if only we lived on the scaffold . . .*) as a hopeful affective state contingent on the ability to experiment with the relationship between subjectivity and spatial production. The potential happiness produced by the metaphorical scaffold echoes Robertson's interest in the codex as a site of experimentation, but even as I want to affirm the importance of this kind of experimentation, the *performative hopefulness* of Robertson's text threatens to paper over the political and social realities of the city as it destabilizes and restabilizes.

Mapping Spatial Dissolution and Struggle in Eng's *Mercenary English*

While Robertson's literary and philosophical approach opens space to think through the potentials of literature to rearticulate how we understand the city, it struggles to account for the specific material conditions of Vancouver as it is dismantled and as many residents live not on a metaphorical scaffold but in a literal tent city. Where Robertson values the literary and the philosophical in her *refashioning* of the city, Eng privileges the material circumstances and experiences of those living in her neighbourhood, aiming for a kind of articulatory realism that is grounded not in the speculative potentials of art and writing, but in the ability of poetry to map larger social dynamics in ways that recode and transform our understandings of a space. This is not to devalue Robertson's work, but there are limits to Robertson's philosophical approach to the "agencies of matter." In a way that Robertson doesn't, Eng privileges the material relations between people in her neighbourhood and in the streets as they meet one another. Eng reads the gentrification of the DTES alongside the policing of marginalized

communities and the disappearance of Indigenous women (locally and on wider scales) to map a slow-motion spatial takeover, where tents rise and fall in response to the destruction of both social housing and a community with a history, as developers rebuild the physical buildings block by block and replace the neighbourhood body by body.

In her afterword, added to the second and third editions of *Mercenary English*, Eng relates life in the area between 1996 and 2016, reflecting on her decision to move out of the neighbourhood:

> I'm leaving because I'm saddened by what the area's become: an expensive enclave that has displaced some of the city's most vulnerable people. For years, United We Can, the recycling depot, was located across the alley from my building; it was moved, forcing the poor people who do our recycling to travel further to do their work. Last summer the building was demolished—suddenly, surreally, I could see Hastings from my window—and construction began for a new condo tower. (119)

Pointedly, Eng frames this demolition as part of a larger "war on the poor" (119) whose greatest weapon is real estate. In this moment, Eng reads the demolition of the United We Can building in a way that connects gentrification to the relations it disrupts and the ones it enables. United We Can's movement into a warehouse space just east of Main Street shifts the work lives of many poor people both out of the neighbourhood and out of sight. In turn, the replacement of the building with a new condo tower furthers the enclaving of the neighbourhood, reterritorializing the space for the rich.

Eng's concretely localized poetics repeatedly considers the competing stabilizing and destabilizing forces that struggle over and change the neighbourhood, from the incursions of real estate development to the longer historical lines of colonialism in Vancouver. In a series of poems titled "how it is," Eng produces a textual time lapse of the street, providing a diachronic map of the neighbourhood's slow dissolve. Because of their shared context and interest in flatly representing the front face of Hastings, Eng's "how it is" echoes Stan Douglas' panorama photograph *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (2001), which captures the south side of the titular block at night and entirely unpeopled. Reid Shier's catalogue essay for the photograph situates it within its social and historical context in a moment where, to use Shier's language, 100 West Hastings had "declined," "deteriorated," and was "disintegrating" (11), just before the redevelopment of the Woodward's building. In the same catalogue, Jeff Sommers and Nick Blomley trace the "pathologization" of the area, whereby "[t]he pathologization of the

poor turned into the pathologization of the entire neighbourhood" (21)—the neighbourhood itself becoming the cause of localized problems that threatened to spread to the rest of the city. Sommers and Blomley suggest that it is unsurprising that the *poverty* of the DTES is what's represented in Vancouver media and urban planning as a spreading social menace, rather than "the unfettered consumption and spiraling housing prices that mark the affluent side of the widening gap" (44). Following this, they lay out the logic coding the space:

> Overlaying this is a sense of loss, deepened by mythologized memories of Hastings Street's past as a shared space of commercial vitality. The city has been "taken" from its inhabitants by the poor: as commuters speed down Hastings Street, they are invited to reflect that this is no longer "our" neighbourhood. The only way the valued landscape of the Downtown Eastside can be saved, on this account, is with the removal of what threatens it—the poor—and its replacement by citizens who are better equipped to reclaim its potential, both economically and historically. Property owners, attuned to "heritage" values, are to be encouraged to homestead the wilderness, and recapture this space and its authentic meanings. (49)

Echoing Neil Smith's reading of gentrification as the exploitation of an urban frontier, Sommers and Blomley frame this settler impulse to "recapture" as both a rethreading of spatial continuity (staking a claim based on a past, "truer" version of the space) and an assertion that one group is "better equipped" to produce that space.

Taken in terms of both the historical context of its production and the decade and a half that has since passed, Douglas' photograph is a time capsule. His panoramic shot of the block differs significantly from the present street, its composition changed by the development of the Woodward's complex and the slow, drastic shift of the photo's empty storefronts to upscale businesses. The 100 block of West Hastings is a flashpoint for anti-gentrification activists. Woodward's became an anchoring point for critiques of gentrification after the 2002 Woodward's Squat—documented by Aaron Vidaver in the Woodsquat issue of *West Coast Line* (2004)—where residents of the DTES occupied the then-empty Woodward's building for three months demanding more social housing. This resulted in Woodward's becoming a key example circulating in local urbanist rhetoric of the positive potentials of mixed-use, mixed-income development, while the larger culture of development within the city has raised rents, reduced affordable and social housing stock, and increased homelessness. Part of the punctum of Douglas' streetscape comes out of the recognition that so

much has changed. Making explicit the temporality inherent in this change, Eng's diachronic map in "how it is" records the shift over time, making the shift visible not as a sweeping, immediate change but as a piece-by-piece process determined by relationships to property. Eng's map makes visible the destabilizing edge of deterritorialization and the subsequent reterritorializing moves to stabilize the neighbourhood as the lot-by-lot, block-by-block movements of gentrification swap out parts over time. For Eng, this material shift connects to similarly shifting relational networks in the neighbourhood, where those not "equipped" to produce the good community by colonizing the frontier of gentrification get pushed out.

Eng responds to the way she sees her neighbourhood being taken apart, her home dissolved to clear space for something else. But we need to be careful with how we read Eng's mapping in "how it is," because of the way that, like Douglas', her representation of Hastings is largely depopulated (though with occasional personal interjections).[3] In her afterword, Eng bristles at the way Douglas' photograph excludes the neighbourhood's residents. "I wasn't impressed," she suggests, "[t]here are no people in it, none of the low-income people that populate the area" (120). Eng points to Denise Blake Oleksijczuk's reading of the photograph's absence of people in her 2002 essay "Haunted Spaces":

> The photograph's deep emptiness provides an opening in which to contemplate the fate of Vancouver's missing women. Considering the mounting numbers of missing and murdered sex trade workers is one way to fill the picture's void. From this perspective, the image can be appropriated to suggest that the denial of the missing women can never be complete. Its emptiness can be mobilized to evoke a space haunted by the socially disprized and unloved. (110)

In Oleksijczuk's argument, the photograph becomes a site not just of reflection and contemplation, but also of active critique as the social emptiness of the image can be "appropriated" and "mobilized" to draw attention to missing and murdered women. Eng rejects this, asserting that "[f]or some of us, this erasure is lived, not the subject (object?) of art" (121). By asserting the lived experience of the residents of the DTES (herself included), Eng points to a limit of contemplation—of standing at the threshold of an art object (or a codex) to "reflect"—namely that, in a moment like the one Oleksijczuk imagines, there is not only an erasure of women themselves (which the photograph opens space for), but also an erasure of the spatial processes and histories enabling the disappearance of women. Though a speculative frame like Douglas' provides a frame

for reflection and even structural analysis, it lacks, for Eng, the lived experience needed to analyze the realities of a space like 100 West Hastings. Eng pointedly remarks on the way that "[s]ome of us remember the police denying that a(nother) serial killer was murdering women from the neighbourhood" (121)—an admonishment that plants her not in the distanced window of Douglas' photograph, but in the immediate middle of the peopled street where she can catch a different and no less necessary angle on the neighbourhood's rhythms.

Rather than focus on the depeopled scene or on decontextualized individuals, Eng's "new accurate maps" (72) trace the complex entanglements of the neighbourhood's social field, proposing a form of realism that articulates the processes and structures that bear down on the neighbourhood as a whole and the individuals who live there. Eng maps an array of tense and conflicting structural pressures and assembling potentials as she puts together a cognitive map of the DTES. She presents the positions different bodies are expected to take within a shifting, power-filled assemblage, grounding that map in her own experience. With the relationship between the body and structural violence in mind, while Eng maps a DTES and a Vancouver where one set of spatial relations, practices, and architectures replaces another—one assemblage stabilizing in the space where another dissolves—she also presents subjectivity as fraught and multiplied. In the process, she mobilizes a political anger navigated through the ways her persona is contextually tugged between subject positions from activist to artist to sex worker. Eng's sequence flips between "different frontlines" (51); that is, between different points of struggle, different face-to-face conversations that, through their accumulation and interconnection, provide a glimpse of the spatial relations that articulate Eng's speaker's body. In "February 2010," set amidst the activist organizing during the 2010 Olympics and constant engagements with police and surveillance, Eng dramatizes a position caught between the linked gazes of cop and man:

> don't worry, you can trust us
>
> I look right into his boyish, handsome face
> and then the other one's and I say
>
> no, I don't think so
>
> he smiles at his buddy, replies
>
> ouch! . . . stone cold
>
> did the cops just flirt with me? (61)[4]

In this comedic short circuit, Eng pairs two instances of being "checked out." While Eng's speaker reads the cops coming to check out a disturbance, the cops themselves are busy checking *her* out. Both overlapping instances are predicated on not only a kind of surveillance—one body checking out another—but also of a potential violence, one state-enforced, the other patriarchal. By exposing the overlap of these two gazes—a pairing that repeats throughout her sequence in the positions of the male activist and artist—Eng underlines the violence inherent in both, demonstrating a different timbre of stability and instability applied not only at the scale of the neighbourhood, but at the scale of the body. There isn't the ease or potential of refashioning the body here. Instead, Eng repeatedly challenges the ways she is articulated by others, calling out discomfort with her relationship to activism and academia.

For Eng, spatial instability (like stability) is precisely produced through the ways a relational network can act as a source of violence and an articulatory form of policing. If the flattened, depeopled street of "how it is" shows a deterritorializing edge rippling through the built environment, the shifting positions of "Vancouver 2010" show how the identity of a neighbourhood, city, and individual body are defined and stabilized by the historically developed striations that shape both space and the movements available to different bodies. When Eng describes being policed over and over, she is reminded of what potential roles she can assume within the spatial relations of the city. Extending this discussion of violence, in the poem "knuckle sandwich," Eng repeatedly quotes from Yasmin Jiwani's work on gendered violence against Indigenous women and women of colour to underline a distinction between visible and invisible violence. Jiwani's article "Mediations of Domination: Gendered Violence Within and Across Borders" articulates the ways in which the media frequently circulates representations of Muslim women as victims—a trope that further justifies the military interventions of the Canadian state overseas—and compares such representations to those of Indigenous women, who are presented "less as victims deserving rescue than as bodies that simply do not matter" (137). Jiwani, as quoted by Eng, explicitly links the violence done to Muslim and Indigenous women through an inverse relationship directly related to the border of the colonial state:

> *The visibility accorded to one expression or manifestation of violence and the invisibility of the other are interlocked. One supports and depends on the other.* (qtd. in Eng 12; Jiwani 132)

Working from Jiwani's argument about the connections between visible and invisible violences against racialized women, Eng notes an interlinked web of

violence produced at different scales but landing squarely on the local. For Eng, violence is not limited to specific bodies, but its effects shift depending on which bodies are involved and emerge from ongoing processes of colonial dispossession.

In this frame, Eng's reading of the DTES begins to resemble Mexican journalist Sergio González Rodríguez's concept of the "femicide machine," a term he uses to map the ways the city of Ciudad Juárez (connecting at the US border to El Paso) "normalized barbarism," specifically a local culture where women were regularly murdered. Through the productive force of a "mutated" and "anomalous" urban ecology (7), he illustrates the way these spatial mechanics can produce a terrifying and deadly situation. Eng scales this sense of an anomalous ecology to not only encompass the dangerous conditions for racialized women in the DTES of Vancouver, but also to articulate a wider connection with the war on terror and colonial appropriation of Indigenous territory. Eng triangulates three "trails": the US Trail of Tears that saw the violent relocation of five Indigenous nations from their traditional territory in the 1830s, the Highway of Tears between Prince George and Prince Rupert in BC where a significant number of Indigenous women have vanished over a forty-year period, and the stretch of the Trans-Canada Highway in BC between Langley and Abbotsford renamed the Highway of Heroes to memorialize thirteen soldiers who died in Afghanistan. Eng abuts these three trails, moving from territorial dispossession to bodily disappearance to imperial valour to ask not only which bodies have value, but also what *kind* of value—which bodies are honoured, which need rescue, which are disposable. Within Eng's poem, the thirteen soldiers honoured with the so-called Highway of Heroes stand in stark relief against the over twelve hundred missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls across Canada including those from the DTES.[5]

Somewhere Else

Mercedes Eng's Vancouver is not Lisa Robertson's Vancouver, despite a shared concern over the way the city is reshaped by capitalist and colonialist forces. Eng's work in the tension point between the territorial specificity of the DTES and the complex relational forces and networks that produce and struggle over it both reflects an often literal sense of contestation and stabilizes a sense of the relations dissolved alongside the row of storefronts on Hastings Street. The result is an articulation of the space as *more* than real estate. In her bending of scales and folding of histories into the present, Eng produces a relational map alongside her territorial one, writing a spatial poetics that

reads the DTES under crisis but not isolated in that crisis, related to colonial wars both outside and inside borders. Eng's work complicates Robertson's appeals to instability or fragility or temporariness as a condition for speculative experiment with potential resistance. Eng's articulatory realism—her "new accurate maps"—proposes that instability is actually a problem for certain bodies (now and historically). What we end up with is a tension between stability and instability that depends on both the way the assemblage is coded and the subject position of the one navigating it.

Mercenary English, then, poses a different kind of urban-focused challenge to this problem of what possibilities emerge when space changes, grounded in the realities of life in an embattled neighbourhood as they connect to similar struggles historically and globally. If Robertson's appeal to the "agencies of matter" in her conversation with McCaffery points us to the co-productive engagements we have with human and non-human others (including the field of texts she mobilizes), Eng more pointedly asks *how* those others matter and what logics or narratives shape those engagements. What Eng pointedly asserts in her conceptual roleplay is a tension around value that directly shapes how spaces are produced, how actors engage with one another, and how different actors are articulated by spatial and social relations. In spaces like the gentrifying DTES, understandings of what or who is valuable (or profitable) shape the kinds of relations that can make space. Speaking about the struggles for Indigenous sovereignty across North America, Audra Simpson argues that "[i]n situations in which sovereignties are nested and embedded, one proliferates at the other's expense," noting further that "under these conditions, there cannot be two perfectly equal, robust sovereignties" (12). Simpson's sense of struggle between spatializing sets of relations, writ large in the conflict between colonial and Indigenous nations, plays out at smaller scales like the DTES (and Snauq) as incursionary groups slowly dissolve, denature, and unsettle existing relations in order to remake that territory as Canada, Vancouver, or whatever the neighbourhood along Hastings Street will be called in the future.

NOTES

1 Most of the pieces in *Office for Soft Architecture* share this pedigree and are part of Robertson's ongoing practice of art writing, a practice shared by other former members of the Kootenay School of Writing given the social proximity of the poetry and art communities in Vancouver. As such, Robertson's work in *Office for Soft Architecture* carries not only genre elements of architectural writing, but also of the catalogue essay.

2 Rem Koolhaas' speculative urbanism, collected in a book like *S, M, L, XL* (1995), imagines architecture and urbanism as forms of research. In this form of "paper" urbanism, proposals for architectural or design projects can act as critical interventions into a site even when they aren't used to rebuild that site. A more recent and more obviously political example is described in the book *Architecture After Revolution* (2013) by the Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency, who, looking to challenge colonial violence in Palestine, "mobilize architecture and individual buildings in our vicinity as optical devices and as tactical tools within the unfolding struggle for Palestine" (Petti et al. 32). The texts they produce propose projects not with the intent of building anything, but with the intent of critiquing spatial violence.

3 To provide one example, on the north side of Hastings between Main Street and Columbia Street, Eng records an empty building, but adds in parentheses that the building was previously "the Smilin' Buddha where my dad saw Jimi Hendrix" (80)—a personal connection to the street that stretches back decades.

4 Eng edits this particular poem between the first and second editions of her book. This passage reflects the formatting of the recent third edition.

5 The figure of over five hundred missing and murdered women is provided by Eng, credited to the Native Women's Association of Canada and collected in the middle of "knuckle sandwich": "the Native Women's Association of Canada has documented / over 500 cases of Aboriginal Missing and Murdered Women / from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (and Prince George and / Edmonton and . . .) and across Canada over the last 30 years" (26).

WORKS CITED

"Call for Papers for a Special Issue on 'The Concept of Vancouver.'" *Canadian Literature,* 2 Mar. 2017, canlit.ca/call-for-papers-for-a-special-issue-on-the-concept-of-vancouver/. Accessed 28 July 2018.

Davidson, Michael. "On the Outskirts of Form: Cosmopoetics in the Shadow of NAFTA." *Textual Practice*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2008, pp. 733-56.

DeLanda, Manuel. *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. Bloomsbury, 2006.

Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Translated by Tom Conley, U of Minnesota P, 1992.

Douglas, Stan. *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*. Edited by Reid Shier, Contemporary Art Gallery / Arsenal Pulp, 2002.

Eng, Mercedes. *Mercenary English*. 3rd ed., Talonbooks, 2018.

—. "echolocation: In Conversation with Fred Moten." *Mercenary English*, by Mercedes Eng, 2nd ed., Mercenary, 2016.

Invisible Committee. *To Our Friends*. Semiotexte, 2015.

Jiwani, Yasmin. "Mediations of Domination: Gendered Violence Within and Across Borders." *Feminist Interventions in International Communication: Minding the Gap*, edited by Katharine Sarikakis and Leslie Regan Shade, Rowman and Littlefield, 2008, pp. 129-45.

Joseph, Maia. "The Afterlife of the City: Reconsidering Urban Poetic Practice." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2009, pp. 152-77.

Maracle, Lee. "Goodbye Snauq." *First Wives Club: Coast Salish Style*. Theytus, 2010, pp. 13-28.

Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus, Penguin, 1993.

Morton, Stephen. "A Poetics of Place in the World-System: West Coast Modernism and the Integration of Vancouver into the Global Economy." *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 47, no. 1-2, 2016, pp. 127-61.
Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rem Koolhaas, and Bruce Mau. *S, M, L, XL*. Monacelli, 1995.
Oleksijczuk, Denise Blake. "Haunted Spaces." Douglas, pp. 96-116.
Petti, Alessandro, Sandi Hilal, and Eyal Weizman [Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency]. *Architecture After Revolution*. Sternberg, 2014.
Robertson, Lisa. *The Apothecary*. Tsunami, 1991.
—. *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. Clear Cut, 2003.
—. "Time in the Codex." *Nilling: Prose Essays on Noise, Pornography, The Codex, Melancholy, Lucretius, Folds, Cities, and Related Aporias*. BookThug, 2012, pp. 9-18.
Robertson, Lisa, and Steve McCaffery. "PhillyTalks 17, October 3, 2000." *PhillyTalks*, curated by Louis Cabri, PennSound, 2000, pp. 1-38 media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/groups/phillytalks/pdfs/pt17.pdf.
Rodríguez, Sergio González. *The Femicide Machine*. Translated by Michael Parker-Stainback, Semiotexte, 2012.
Schmidt, Christopher. "The Utopian Textures and Civic Commons of Lisa Robertson's Soft Architecture." *Reading the Difficulties: Dialogues with Contemporary American Innovative Poetry*, edited by Thomas Fink and Judith Halden-Sullivan, U of Alabama P, 2014, pp. 146-56.
Simpson, Audra. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Duke UP, 2014.
Smith, Neil. "New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as a Global Urban Strategy." *Antipode*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2002, pp. 427-50.
Sommers, Jeff, and Nick Blomley. "'The Worst Block in Vancouver." Douglas, pp. 18-58.
Stephens, Paul. "'The Dystopia of the Obsolete': Lisa Robertson's Vancouver and the Poetics of Nostalgia." *Open Letter*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2010, pp. 15-32.
Vidaver, Aaron, editor. *Woodsquat*, special issue of *West Coast Line*, vol. 37, no. 2-3, 2003-04.