

# Underground, Unseen, Unknown

Negotiating Toronto in Maggie  
Helwig's *Girls Fall Down*

Think of how certain urban spaces figure in the national literary imaginary: Timothy Taylor's *Stanley Park* with its homeless population; Kensington Market's ethnic vibrancy in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*; the transcendent mountain at the centre of Montreal in Hugh Hood's "Looking Down from Above"; Gabrielle Roy's impoverished St. Boniface in *Rue Deschambault*; and the exploding Halifax harbour in Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising*. Perhaps because Canada is such a large country, we aren't able to visit all these places (though we can read about them); and often what results are quickly formed generalizations that render such spaces seemingly static.

But, of course, they aren't. Doreen B. Massey, in her study of space and place, asserts that locales, from small city parks to gritty alleys, are "processes" since "places can be conceptualized in terms of the social interactions which they tie together . . . [and] these interactions themselves are not motionless things, frozen in time" (155). In reading about geographically differentiated spaces, we might heed Massey's conclusion that the "specificity of place . . . derives from the fact that each place is the focus of a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations" (156). Since social relations are constantly made and remade most intensely in urban spaces, it is unsurprising that cities—including their ostensibly inert elements, such as parks and ravines—possess the potential for random public explosions.

It is this potential for spontaneous or unforeseen eruptions or outbursts—and their equally unpredictable consequences—that is central to Maggie

Helwig's *Girls Fall Down*. In it, Toronto-the-built-city is in an often fraught relation to its populace, as both the city's artificial and natural components are never as transparent as those who must negotiate the city's terrain might hope. The mix of buildings, roads, subways, and utilities is situated in an apparent contradistinction to the trees and lawns and ravines that are often considered "natural" aspects of the city's landscapes.

But each of the latter categories might be said to have been constructed through *intention*—they have been planted, for example, or very consciously left alone—with the result that there is, arguably, nothing really natural about anything in a city. Indeed, as Don Mitchell argues, "[t]he degree to which landscapes are *made* (by hands and minds) and represented (by particular people and classes, and through the accretion of history and myth) indicates that landscapes are in some very important senses 'authored.' Hence landscape can be understood to be a kind of text" (121). And so, a person moving within or through certain locales—a tunnel, say, or a park—requires not only familiarity with routes or paths, but also an awareness of how to read his or her position in relation to the situation of others *and* other things. *Girls Fall Down* proposes that such attentiveness—the very ability to clearly map one's place in relation to other, shifting people and things—demands an understanding that control over one's environment (including how one presents oneself in it) is merely a fantasy, and that more attention to the machinations and the agendas of those seeking control is imperative.

Such control extends, naturally, to one's own body. In her pioneering study of the relation between bodies and cities, Elizabeth Grosz contends that the built environment that is the city is intimately involved in the social production of corporeality. She asserts that these entities are mutually defining to the extent that

the form, structure and norms of the city seep into and affect all the other elements that go into the constitution of corporeality and/as subjectivity. It affects the ways the subject sees others . . . as well as the subject's understanding of alignment with, and positioning in space. Different forms of lived spatiality . . . affect the ways in which we live space, and thus our comportment and corporeal orientations and the subject's form of corporeal exertion—the kind of terrain it must negotiate day by day. (248-49)

Invariably, the city's and the body's respective landscapes—their surfaces and their often masked interiors—constantly work to shape the constitution of one another, creating environments that are always in flux.

The resulting instability creates environments that render people vulnerable to various powerful forces—concerning, say, the maintenance of

class and/or racial privileges—and their hidden agendas. Try as people may to stabilize their citified worlds in the face of these often unknown mediating influences, obtaining an enduring, settled state becomes a task that requires constant (self-)surveillance. A city and its conflicted inhabitants (who constitute that very city) are threatened with disarray, confusion, falling down. Reading the scripts and maps that constitute the city's texts requires constant attention to revision.

And so a person's inability to map out *with certainty* the city as it is encountered suggests, in Helwig's book, a crisis of legibility that is inherent in the urban landscapes themselves. Various urban networks—from assorted means of transportation to interpersonal human relationships—are fragile and fraught, to the extent that what we easily label as “the city,” despite its seemingly solid material forms (both alive and inert), is best understood as provisional: the confluence and convergence of its actors underscore both a place and a landscape that is constantly re-envisioned, always makeshift, and potentially problematic. Professional and personal maps might help in navigation, but these things cannot protect against the undercurrents and unseen dangers of the urban fabric.

### **The City and Its Actors**

Such instability arises, as Erik Swyngedouw argues in his discussion on the work of David Harvey, because “the city condenses the manifold tensions and contradictions that infuse modern life” (80). It becomes easy and rather commonplace, he continues, to see cities as “highly differentiated spaces of activity, excitement, and pleasure. They are arenas for the pursuit of unoppressed activities and desires, but also ones replete with systematic power, danger, oppression, domination, and exclusion” (80). *Girls Fall Down* addresses these often contrasting and difficult-to-read categories through characters that act out urban tensions, to various degrees.

One of the novel's central characters, Suzie, is writing a dissertation using network analysis theory to examine Toronto's homeless populations. In discussing her proposal with Alex, her erstwhile lover, she remarks that gathering data concerning the “network[s] of acquaintance” that are hallmarks of any urban constitution is a way of “[p]utting together pieces of the city” (57), one not unlike Alex's obsession with photographing after-hours Toronto. Suzie's specific interest in the homeless populace, however, arises from her desire to locate her brother Derek, a schizophrenic man living in one of Toronto's many ravines.

Suzie's somewhat self-serving academic endeavour, then, is an effort to *read* the social relations of the city as somewhat self-evident. Her need is to render Derek accessible and stable, to vanquish the instability that plagues his (and thus, her) life. Her literal use of text—writing out what Derek *means*—is meant to contain him in a tangible map of her own making, in the hopes that she may be able to plot his life and have him *act* it out according to her script. In this, she unwittingly works counter to the analysis she is applying in her studies.

Her attempt to find her brother through a rigid rather than flexible framework recalls the work of Bruno Latour, perhaps the most original of actor-network theorists. He states that “it is possible to trace more sturdy relations and discover more revealing patterns by finding a way to register the links between unstable and shifting frames of reference rather than by trying to keep one frame stable” (24). The impetus of the theory, he continues, is not “to stabilize the social on behalf of the people it studies; such a duty is to be left entirely to the ‘actors themselves’” (30-31). Suzie's attempt at stabilizing Derek's relation to other people literally through remedial medication or re-institutionalization or figuratively in her dissertation is not unlike a desire for that “one stable frame.” Although Suzie professes to be studying patterns in order to achieve deeper understanding, she really wants such patterns simply to reveal Derek's whereabouts to her.

The inherent irony in Suzie's search is that it leads her not only back to Derek (later in the story), but also back to Alex, whose former, youthful infatuation with Suzie has been rekindled as the two now approach middle age. Alex's own “network of acquaintances” extends only to his cat, Lady Jane, and a homeless man who inhabits the sidewalk outside Alex's apartment and who proffers cryptic wisdom for a loonie. Alex's own internal network is “corrupted” by diabetes; and his need to take insulin as a remedy for this internal, unseen disease merely increases his desire for isolation and self-control. His internal physical conflict is made manifest as a psychic one when he dwells upon the diabetes that ails him: he finds that “his body had identified a part of itself as a foreign invader and destroyed it” (64), though, of course, this process never ends as he is never cured. Like the city, his corporeality is, as Grosz has stated above, a “terrain [he] must negotiate day by day” (240).

Yet in imagining himself as a citizen who is perfectly legible to those around him, he admonishes a friend, Adrian, about his ostensible availability: “I'm in the phone book, as it happens. . . . [Y]ou open up the

book and see it or not. I mean, if you want to know, it's not like it's an actual difficulty" (13). Alex, though, never offers to look up the numbers of other people himself. The text that is the phone book provides him with a kind of cover in that it is simply about numbers and cannot reveal any of his physical and concomitant emotional vulnerabilities. Indeed, just prior to meeting Adrian, he has witnessed other people's helplessness in the Toronto subway: he photographed crowds of people affected by an invisible ailment suddenly plaguing people in the system, and thus the entire system itself.

That the subway network succumbs to temporary paralysis is a parallel to the "hypo" state Alex can fall prey to if he does not take his insulin. On what he has seen and photographed, he later muses:

There were no visible effects of the subway incident, but he thought that people did know somehow, fragments and rumours; he was not even sure why he thought this, except for a slight modulation in the atmosphere, a measure of silence, glances of quiet complicity between the Portuguese housewives and the Asian teenagers. (16)

Despite knowing that the rumours of "poison" in the subway are just hearsay, Alex attempts to look for *visible* clues to interpret something unseen, in order that what is threatening might be made less so. But the fact remains that the people around him in the streetcar likely know even less than he, a witness, does about the episode. In his effort to decipher the abstract, he misreads the situation by considering exteriors—his easy way of identifying people by their race, for example—in the same way that he thinks people can read him as simply as if he were a number they could look up.

Here, Alex implicitly distinguishes himself as white, in as much as Helwig implicitly classifies him and the central characters of the novel as white. Various omniscient passages in the novel discuss how other persons, often denoted by race and class, are reacting to the ongoing poison scare. In some ways, Helwig's specific attention to them serves to set into relief Alex's relatively privileged position in the city, as a white male who is able to move about freely in ways that non-white persons may not be able to without arousing the suspicion of various authorities. Such gestures to the always present yet liminal "phantoms" of class, race, and ethnicity engage peripherally what other recent Toronto-centered novels translating the immigrant experience deal with upfront.

For example, Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* (also set in Toronto) begins with its central characters on the same subway Helwig describes. Brand writes that "[w]hat floats in the air on a subway train like this is

chance. People stand or sit with the thin magnetic film of their life wrapped around them. They think they're safe, but they know they're not" (4). Unlike Helwig's protagonists, who never profess to feeling particularly *unsafe*, Brand's central characters Tuyen, Oku, and Carla experience "the earth beneath them shifting, and they all want it to stop" (4). They cannot take for granted their positioning in the city, since their "race" or ethnicity visibly marks them as different. There is clearly a hierarchy operating within the urban machine that reads the body in specific ways and attaches hindrances to various types of bodies—usually to those whose race is not white and who are economically less advantaged.

In order to get a reprieve, at least, from the constant shifting, Tuyen and her friends establish what Nancy Fraser has termed "subaltern counterpublics"—that is, "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate their counter discourses based on oppositional identities, interests, and needs" (67). They effectively rewrite the urban text so that it responds to their own needs. Yet these counterpublics remain within the overall urban framework and, thus, emancipation from prescribed (white) racializing notions of subaltern classes is not always tenable.

Helwig's frequent glances at those who occupy such counterpublics and who now constitute the bulk of Toronto's population suggest that there is a constant pressure on those who were once considered the city's invisible others. These become layered in the novel: early risers, including a Somali girl and an Iranian man (23); drug dealers (58); a cleaning woman (119); two graffiti artists (128); panhandlers (150); a prostitute (172); a man in a turban (175); and a Nigerian man (202), amongst others. Their stories, while not advancing the central story, hover and demand consideration as to how they are nevertheless affected by the ripples and pulls on Toronto's urban fabric, since they now constitute the majority of Toronto's population. Envisioned as part of Helwig's novelistic margins, they are signs of how the city itself often attempts to relegate certain people to the periphery, but without much success. And the people inhabiting these worlds do stand in contradistinction to Alex's and Suzie's worlds. Those inhabiting the margins, though, are swiftly compromising the city's "centre" and cannot, Helwig implies, be ignored.

It is not, then, that Alex remains ignorant of those around him, nor does he seek to stereotype others.<sup>1</sup> But the city's flux and the evolving emergency now demanding attention require more than a surface viewing, and Alex requires more than photographs and conjecture to get at the truth about a

subway incident he cannot (and never does) wholly fathom. To his credit, though, he wonders that the underground fracas might give rise to more curiosity, but he is aware that what people end up doing, in the end, is to “incorporate it almost instantly into the flow of daily life” (17)—which is what he does. His actions reveal the often unacknowledged necessity people feel, including himself and Suzie (and all the others in the city, including people like Brand’s characters), to move to homogeneity—a sense of an agreed-upon reality that will “stabilize the social”—when confronted with a complexity of networks and systems that, whether internal or external, are or can be corrupted.

For example, the homeless man outside Alex’s apartment is employed by Alex in the attempt to locate Derek. He is of little concrete help, yet he is part of the city’s fabric whose worth should not be, Helwig suggests, minimalized or marginalized. City dwellers may ignore or shun him; but as a visible part of the landscape, he is one facet of the city’s homeless population and should not be generalized as a symbol of that marginal populace. His logic is perhaps evident only to himself, and his cryptic messages play to the crisis of legibility that plagues the city’s actors. He says to Alex that “maybe there was a breakdown in the system a while ago” (60), suggesting that to read the present crisis as isolated is to miss the larger point, that the city’s networks have been frayed to the extent that ever more people have become disempowered. And as he says later to Alex (in one of his allusions to the falling World Trade Centers in 2001), “[S]ometimes things fall down, sir, and the force of your will can’t keep them standing” (107). The implicit suggestion is that as the constitution of the city continues to change, the old centre—inhabited by those holding advantages by virtue of their wealth or race—cannot hold.

This homeless man directs Alex to an address nearby, on Bathurst Street, and Alex’s ensuing encounter with Mrs. Nakamura reveals how the agendas of two people, regardless of race or class, can (appear to) result in a lack of connection, since each person is essentially travelling along a different, non-intersecting network. Alex lives above a store; Mrs. Nakamura lives in a basement apartment. His internal disorder is physical, while hers is mental. Yet, while Mrs. Nakamura asks him to fix (by writing to City Hall) a somewhat imaginary problem he cannot remedy, Alex realizes that neither of them is really all that stable. Like Brand’s characters, “the earth beneath them [is] shifting” (Brand 4); and though they hail from different social spheres, it is what everyone *needs* that he feels brings them together: “Mrs. Nakamura and I are waiting for rescue,” he silently prays (Helwig 105).

### The Hidden City

Mrs. Nakamura's basement apartment is metonymic of the legion of networks that, in the city, remain hidden because they are underground. The novel opens with the observation that Toronto "is a city that burrows, tunnels, turns underground. It has built strata of malls and pathways and inhabited spaces like the layers in an archeological dig, a body below the earth. . . . The dangers to this city enter the bloodstream, move through interior channels" (7). As with Alex's diabetes and Derek's schizophrenia, the city's own networks of ravines and underground malls and subways, ostensibly benign places, have the potential to make latent tensions visible.<sup>2</sup>

The Don Valley ravine that Derek lives in, a part of a very large, interconnected citywide system, is a place of pleasure for its visitors but is also a refuge for (mostly transient) people who seek to hide there.<sup>3</sup> Although it may appear to be left untouched as parkland, the impetus behind not developing the ravines for housing or commercial uses likely arises from the difficulty of navigating steep banks and waterways. The Don Valley has a history of accommodating the homeless and those thought to be less desirable denizens; it is, thus, a place that is in some ways already "fallen." Indeed, as Jennifer Bonnell observes, a connection exists "between perceptions of the river valley as a marginal space at the edge of the city and its function as a repository for marginalized people" (2). Derek may be thought to present a "danger" to those using the parkland, but Helwig intimates that the danger to the city is a result of the marginalization of people like Derek who are, though often unseen, a part of the city's bloodstream.

Derek exists in one of the city's many liminal spaces, which "knit the rough edges of the city together, buffering its boundaries and marking transitions between the punctual, predictable Toronto we think we know and the feral, disordered or supernatural city we have always suspected exists alongside it" (Harris 58). The natural disarray of the secretive ravine contrasts sharply with another bloodstream, the subterranean PATH system—twenty-seven kilometres in length—which functions as a series of malls and linking pathways for shoppers and office workers. Yet for Alex, it is a place for him to document, after hours, the empty and sterile city spaces that unwittingly reflect the isolated nature of his own life. As a hidden part of the city, the PATH system, which Alex photographs, represents a kind of homogenization of the more sinister connotations associated with the word "underground." In his study of Toronto places, John Bentley Mays says of the PATH:



Moving through those immaculate and almost shadowless corridors, one finds none of those characters typically associated with the undergrounds in legends and stories—sexual desperados, outlaws, mad hermits, wild boys who rule the whole terrifying tracks of the dark world. (150)

Mays adds that the urban planners responsible for such structures have “also begun banishing from the city its ancient cloacal darkness, its space of the sinister, perverse, untamed” (151). Mays is not suggesting that we return to live within the dangers of hidden passageways and alleys; rather, he bemoans the fact that in the name of commerce, the urban experience is being turned into “unending day” (151).<sup>4</sup> Alex bears witness to this cultural shift in his role as a *flâneur*, a person who “wanders the city, slightly invisible, just on the outside of everything—he . . . observes from an anonymous perspective” (Micallef 11).<sup>5</sup> It is this anonymity, however, that reflects his emotional distance both from the dangers within and the complexity of social actors all around him. And change does press upon Alex, though he likely believes himself immune to the swiftly mutating social shifts in the urban fabric of which he is part. His corporeality is as fragile as those he observes.

It is the subway, though, that functions as the network that causes most danger and anxiety. Supposedly a system that moves people swiftly from one place to another, the underground rails can sometimes go off the rails: the system simply breaks down. Like the people who have created it, the subway network has its own bloodstream that is vulnerable to other forces or internal problems. The young girl (identified in the novel only as “the girl” but whose name, we are to infer, is Eve) tells her friends that she was involved in the (real life) 1995 subway accident, known informally as the Russell Hill Accident.<sup>6</sup> Eve is also involved in the central clash that provides Helwig’s novel with its engine: while on the subway, she falls ill and falls down, resulting in rumours that she had been poisoned. As panic ensues, the “poison” spreads throughout the system; and the fear takes on a life of its own as emotion supplants reason.

Yet it is reason that we most often use, as rational actors, to counter fear when traversing the unknown city. That the urban landscape, including its built form, might be grasped in relatively rational terms is misleading, as the people within cityscapes—including its otherwise inert materiality—are not as predictable as inhabitants might imagine. Society and its structures are not monoliths, as their respective discrete components often break down or act irrationally. As Mitchell argues, the “very built form of a place can have an effect of solidifying particular notions about how the world is structured

and works. Landscape therefore becomes an essential ingredient for structuring the material social relations that make up the world" (100). As I have stated, such relations are always provisional, in that their meanings are constantly created and re-created by the actors who traverse the urban landscapes; their interactions with the built environment's static and transitory elements result in the construction of associations whose occurrences and outcomes often cannot be anticipated or easily determined.

To think, then, that one can effortlessly negotiate the city's landscape—because built forms imbue a sense of constancy and legibility—is to presume too much, to one's detriment. Indeed, Mitchell concludes, "We all *do* read the landscape, but we are not all equal in the process of 'authoring' it—nor in controlling its meanings" (139-40). Reading the city and its depths—such as a subway or a ravine—and successfully navigating them requires an attention to various scripts which the average city dweller, beset by various demands, may not be able to adequately comprehend. These places, Barney Warf says,

are not locales as much as they are processes in which different types of activities are embedded and different forms of interconnection are established. As they become increasingly connected, the repercussions of actions in one area inevitably spiral out to shape other places, so that discreet [sic] boundaries have less and less significance as they are permeated with mounting ease. (71-72)

With a network as formidable, extensive, and interconnecting as a subway or a ravine, it is easy to see how certain actions—a girl falling down or a schizophrenic man trying to hide—can have extensive repercussions. The city's various actors, who may themselves, consciously or inadvertently, set in motion an influential event, often find they have lost control of these episodes' meanings or outcomes.

For example, Derek lives in a ravine near the defunct Toronto Brickworks, just off a deserted stretch of Bayview Avenue, in what Helwig terms "the city's sunken veins" (182). He frequents one of the city's prostitutes, which is for him a "thin line of connection" (232) that links him to many other men and results in him becoming infected with a sexually transmitted disease. His refusal to take medicine that might help stabilize him exacerbates his isolation, from which his sister Suzie would like to rescue him. The tentacles of Derek's actions reach outward through the city's "veins," affecting, Helwig proposes, others in unanticipated ways—as does Eve's fall in the subway.

At Derek's encampment, Alex, who has helped Suzie successfully locate a now-ailing Derek, waits for an ambulance, whose lights provide for him a measure of legibility. From the encampment, he observes:

Outside its pale circle there was nothing but blackness, a chaotic punctuation of lights moving in meaningless patterns. . . . And here, on the edge of this valley, half-blind and tainted with disease, he felt the city inside him with a kind of completeness, all the tangled systems. Money and death, knowledge and care, moving constantly from hand to hand; our absolute dependence of the actions of bodies around us, smog and light and electric charge. (220)

Alex feels within himself not only the weight of his own disease and unease, but also the daunting burden of a network whose script he can only feebly attempt to make legible to himself. Derek is neither at the beginning or end of this “tangle”; but Alex, however obliquely, comes to understand that bodies that may seem distant are indeed inevitably linked to us in ways that are never fully intelligible (echoing his earlier encounter with Mrs. Nakamura). As a photographer who uses a camera as a buffer against the swirl of life around him, he comes to understand that he can live with the paradoxes the city presents.

### **Falling and Rising**

Although he is eventually located, Derek has no idea how his proximity to the “first girl” (72), Eve, and other girls has led to the crisis that continues to affect the city. Eve, at the beginning of the novel, suffers an unwelcome advance from the geography teacher Mr. Sondstrom and a confusing objectifying look from a boy at a Starbucks, both of which intensify her conflicted feelings about her changing body and volatile emotions. Their networks, however, overlap in unanticipated ways that suggest a *perpetrated* coincidence on Helwig’s behalf, one that reflects the inevitability of intersecting city realities.

In school, Eve is studying both the Book of Genesis and William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, the latter serving as an extended metaphor for her experience with her group of friends. Left to their own devices, the girls are as volatile a mix as the marooned boys in Golding’s novel.<sup>7</sup> As Suzie says to Alex, the (so-called) “poisoned girls . . . are like a highly reactive compound” (52).<sup>8</sup> It may also be that girls who are not poisoned are also reactive in ways that cannot be anticipated. Their explosive natures result in effects felt *across* various citified networks, suggesting how individual instances of suffering—Eve, like her biblical namesake, falls from grace—resound throughout society.

No one has been poisoned, though, as Eve’s fall on the subway is an emotional result of her residual confusion over what she and her friends did to Derek, whom they encountered earlier in Chorley Park, an idyllic Eden not far from his home in the ravine. When Eve and her friends see Derek in the park, he is minding his own business. Derek addresses them, apropos of

nothing, saying, "Once upon a time there was a little girl" (235). Although he is thinking of his sister and his revised, mythical version of their childhood, Derek's words also allude to Alice of *Alice in Wonderland*, who falls down the rabbit hole and encounters a confusing world filled with misunderstandings and cryptic knowledge. This parallels Derek's own status as a misunderstood person living "off the grid," who speaks in a language apparently comprehensible only to himself, and whose efforts to connect are distorted and, in other ways, disastrous.

His isolation is not unlike Eve's. She is defined by her role in the subway incident as "the first girl who had fallen" (as opposed to the "girl who had fallen first," reflecting Helwig's careful wording), whose body "bled and ached and fell" (72). She is most forcefully associated with the biblical Eve here, who inhabits the park that is Eden for a time; but also with Suzie, who falls at an abortion rally and is saved by Alex (69); and also the young woman who spray-paints the word "FEAR" about the city and who almost falls onto the subway tracks (235). This loosely formed association of women—based on their belonging to a network of "fallen" or falling women—first suggests the fragmentation inherent in the city (they are similar yet unknown to one another); and, second, that women who have transgressed (biblical Eve's eating of the forbidden apple; Suzie's abortion; the young woman's defacing of public property; the prostitutes Derek visits; and, now, Eve's assault on Derek) are not barred from redemption, or perhaps should not have been considered as transgressors in the first place. Helwig clearly maps their (hidden) relation to the other as the ground beneath them shifts, in that they are part of the same network, and not different ones.

While participating in the assault on Derek, Eve misreads Derek's intent—if it ever were legible or intelligible—and projects her anger onto him: "You have no right. . . . Being like this. *God*" (237). (Or "Being like this god"?) When she enters the subway shortly afterwards, she remembers the Russell Hill Accident that she had been involved in:

[H]er own half-distorted memories of being pulled from the subway car in the darkness, and trying to understand what she had done to make this happen. Bodies falling around her. . . . You could get hurt. People could hurt you. People could hurt you for no reason. (239)

She attempts to apply her prior experience to what has just happened to her, with Derek and Mr. Sondstrom and the Starbucks youth. She knows that "she *had* done something wrong. Or something was wrong, near or around her" (239). But her past experiences in the cityscape cannot give her a rational answer.

Nor should they, since the forceful emotions that roil within her defy easy explanation. The density of the downtown cityscape—the concentration of heterogeneous social actors navigating a compact built environment—merely adds to the pressure attendant upon her. As Steve Pile asserts, “both the body and the city are intensifying grids for simultaneously social and psychic meanings, produced in the mobile, conflictual fusion of power, desire and disgust” (177). Eve has, throughout the course of the day, experienced these in ways that are layered and difficult to unpack in a rational manner. She is but one actor in a network of actors, some close to her, some not; and it remains difficult to navigate various social and concrete terrains that are prone to shifting, even when that city grid is one way to organize the flux of urban experience.

Her immediate circle of friends evinces the tension between asserting one’s individuality and adhering to the group’s norms and mores. Eve wonders “if there was a book about what girls did, how you could talk about it” (129), implying that her self is both apart from and a part of the group. Of course, in a metafictional way, Helwig answers the question with *this* book; yet the aforementioned *Lord of the Flies* is the most obvious (male) parallel. Lauren, the prime motivator of the assault on Derek, reads the derivation for “Beelzebub” at her teacher’s instruction: “Hebrew for Lord of the Flies! Awesome!” (208). She is, in some ways, Eve’s antagonist, playing *The Lord of the Flies*’ Jack to Eve’s Ralph; and Eve has clearly thought of her, that “[e]verything you’re saying is a lie” (73).

Yet Eve doesn’t divorce herself from the group. Helwig implies that it would be difficult for a teenager to act apart from groupthink, especially when emotions become heightened and the social stakes are high. The only constant among the group of girls is the unpredictability brought about by incremental or sudden change, whether those changes arise internally (in their bodies) or externally (in the cityscape). As David Knoke and Song Yang state,

networks are not static structures, but are continually changing through interactions among their constituent people, groups, or organizations. . . . [T]hese entities also transform the relational structures within which they are embedded, both intentionally and unintentionally. (6)

It is as though Eve is in constant battle with unseen, shifting forces—which include both her own emotions and her friends’ needs and desires—that she herself does not, or cannot, rationally recognize. Her anger toward Derek is clearly misplaced—it should likely have found its targets in Mr. Sondstrom or the boy at the Starbucks.

Eve, much later, ponders her reaction to Derek and her subsequent fall on the subway: "She knew she had been singled out at that moment in the subway. That she would always be, at least in some small way, the girl who fell down and started it all, and she knew there was a reason for that" (96). The correlation to the biblical Eve is clear enough; and Helwig reworks that story to suggest that, beyond the unpredictable nature of the girl's world, redemption for both Eves is possible:

Girls fall down because they have come to know too much, and have no words for that knowledge. Sometimes girls fall down and bring chaos to the city, not just because of the bad things around and outside them. Sometimes girls fall down because of a tiny emergent good. (240)

The irony of Eve's fall is that while it provides her with a larger understanding of her own emotions, it renders other parts of the city unstable. This instability continues outside the parameters of the story itself; the intimation is that we come to, and come away, from Helwig's own novel negotiating our own ways as social actors.

### **What You Can't See Can Hurt You**

Even though it is believed in the novel that there is a poison moving through the city's various networks and systems, no one can actually prove what cannot be seen. While airborne toxins can be lethal, they are not visible to the human eye—and neither is the emotion and illogicality wrought by the scene of a young girl falling on a subway car. It is what cannot be rationally read or visually apprehended—especially in places that are under the ground or off the beaten path—that gives rise to fear and miscomprehension. The dangers that circulate through the city's networks are never fully apparent—until they happen, often without much warning. Thus, Helwig's narrator observes that "[t]his is the nature of safety in the measured world—you can be certain of the presence of danger, but you can never guarantee its absence. No measurement quite thrusts itself down to zero, down to absolute lack" (21). Paradoxically, then, certainty as a category is treated with cynical distrust, as city residents must always be cautioned to be alert to the dangers in what is *potentially* unknowable, as Helwig's narrator concludes: "We are not at home in the measured world. We would prefer our safety to be an unmeasurable absolute. Not an approximation" (30). To ask for certainties is, in the end, to demand a fantasy.

## NOTES

- 1 Helwig does not use categories of race to reinforce any character's esteem or sense of self. People like Alex, who are racially unmarked in the novel, are meant to be understood as a racial group amongst many, and it is their (implicitly non-exclusionary) stories that are, by and large, being essayed by Helwig. As a social activist, Helwig does not, I think, feel privileged or qualified enough to write more fully on the lives of racialized others whose realities she may not share. I would argue from this that the novel's inattention to others whose race or ethnicity is marked is not a matter of Helwig having a blind spot concerning such matters.
- 2 Much has been written on the paradoxical nature of Toronto's ravines, most notably, in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and *Cat's Eye*. For a more complete discussion of Toronto ravines and their literary fictive and non-fictive representations, see "Ravine City" in Amy Lavender Harris' *Imagining Toronto* (38-51).
- 3 As of this writing, the decommissioned Don Valley Brickworks, adjacent to the ravines and just below the site where Derek is living, is being redeveloped into a centre for arts, crafts, and food sales.
- 4 In *Generation X*, Douglas Coupland reflects upon this kind of urban sterility when he amusingly renders Toronto as possessing "the efficient, ordered feel of the Yellow Pages sprung to life in three dimensions, peppered with trees and veined with cold water" (18).
- 5 Micallef perceptively notes, in the next sentence, that such "invisibility can disappear, however, if your gender is a little more female or your skin colour a shade or two away from white" (11).
- 6 Both human error and mechanical failure caused the accident on the Spadina line on August 11, 1995. One train rear-ended another, resulting in three deaths and thirty people hospitalized.
- 7 Helwig alludes to the murder of the teenaged Reena Virk by a group of seven girls (and one boy) on November 14, 1997, near Victoria, BC. Helwig writes: "[T]here are girls, sometimes, who gather in groups and choose on of their own to cast out, a girl like them but faintly different. Perhaps they surround her underneath a bridge by a river and begin to hit her . . . and when she falls in the water for the final time they do not pull her out" (56). See *Under the Bridge* by Rebecca Godfrey for a book-length account of the case.
- 8 Alex's question to his friend Adrian concerning the "airborne toxic event" (11) reveals Helwig's debt to Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: Alex asks, "That's from a book, right?" (12). In DeLillo's novel, Jack Gladney, living with a chemical imbalance as a result of an airborne toxic event, muses on the brain's neurotransmitters: "We're the sum of our chemical impulses. . . . What happens to good and evil in this system? Passion, envy and hate? Do they become a tangle of neurons? Are you telling me that a whole tradition of human failings is now at an end, that cowardice, sadism, molestation are meaningless terms?" (190). Haruki Murakami's *Underground* is another obvious influence on Helwig's *Girls Fall Down*, in telling ways. In his account of the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, in which thirteen people died, one of the people interviewed by the author rhetorically states of her illness on the subway that "women are more susceptible, aren't they?" (41). Alex himself imagines the perpetrators of the Tokyo attack twice in the novel (Helwig 28, 75).

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