

Visions of Canadian Modernism

The Urban Fiction of F. R. Livesay
and J. G. Sime

Canada in the 1920s has been traditionally regarded as the desert outpost of modernism. At best, its writers were able to filter modernist experimentation from elsewhere through Canadian landscapes, and to create “a partly isolated culture of patterns and tendencies which exist[ed] in a more complicated form outside” (Dudek 11). At worst, they were content “To paint the native maple” (F. R. Scott) and enumerate old themes, seemingly miles away from metropolitan and cosmopolitan literary trends. If “Canadian literature evolved directly from Victorian into Postmodern” (Kroetsch 1), it appears that this feat was achieved through the nation’s own desire to remain a noncombatant in the struggle between artistic movements. In this sense, Canada remained a neutral zone in the war over modernism: a space of hesitation and vacillation, a land of transience and escape from social and cultural upheaval.

Luckily, this version of the Canadian canon has had its critics, who have asserted the diversity of poetry and fiction written in Canada in the first half of the twentieth century. But it seems that we are only just beginning to address the interpenetration of modernism and the experience of urban modernity, even in texts that are widely acknowledged as dealing with modern city life. For other national literatures, the connection between modernity and urbanity has been at the centre of modernist studies for years. Works by writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Nella Larsen have led to readings of the modern metropolis as a microcosm of the modern world, reflecting its “futility and anarchy” (Eliot 177), or alternatively, its empowering challenges to “totalizing or hegemonic” discourses (Boone 7). In these texts, “the city is not only . . . a form of modern life; it is

the physical embodiment of a decisive modern consciousness” that is expressed through modernist literature (Williams 239). Urbanization and industrialization are narratives that manifest themselves differently depending on cultural contexts, but the experience of the modern city has been a profound and inextricable element in modernist literature—and this is true not only in Britain and the United States, but in Canada as well.

The effect of the metropolis on Canadian writing has, of course, been recognized. Though Mary Jean Green points to the reluctance of the early twentieth-century Québécois literary establishment “to recognize the realities of Quebec’s urbanization and industrialization” (51), Louis Dudek indicates the effects of “the physical tumult and discords” of Montreal on anglophone poets such as A. M. Klein and Irving Layton (61). W. J. Keith has explored the centrality of Toronto in a range of works of fiction (191–251), and George Woodcock has noted in Morley Callaghan’s novels a portrayal “of what we now call urban alienation” (186). More recently, Brian Trehearne has identified a range of High Modernist texts produced in the 1940s that engage in “a poetry of ironic realism, urban life, and class-conscious historicity” (313). Justin Edwards and Glenn Willmott have also made bridges between modernism and urbanism through their studies, respectively, of Callaghan’s *Strange Fugitive* (1928)—which Edwards calls “Canada’s first urban novel” (212)—and Ernest Buckler’s *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952). These critics are leading us towards a new understanding of Canadian modernism, but in the dominant view, 1920s Canada remains a “rural and loyal British *hinterland*” (Pache 1151; italics in original), where the presence of the urban retains its nineteenth-century associations with British Decadence, or reflects imported modernisms, such as those of T. S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway.

We might extend our understanding of Canadian modernism, then, by exploring in more detail works from the 1920s that respond to urban modernity, and that involve the metropolis as it was experienced specifically in Canada. First, we might acknowledge that we do “find ourselves in cities” in early twentieth-century Canadian texts, and that we are not just “led into the countryside” (Willmott 301). The issue is not the absence of the metropolis in 1920s Canadian writing, nor its lack of connection to the cities depicted in Anglo-American modernist texts, but rather a perspective on Canadian literature that has led us to overlook the role of the city. Desmond Pacey has observed, for example, that “we are apt to see Canadian fiction of the twenty years between the two World Wars as a barren area peopled only by Frederick Philip Grove, Morley Callaghan, and Mazo de la Roche” (168). Grove is

identified, of course, as one of the “prairie realists” (189), and Callaghan as the urban realist, while Mazo de la Roche is designated as a “novelist of rural Ontario” (179), despite her depiction in *Jalna* (1927) of the powerful impact of New York City on the imaginations and lives of the Whiteoaks. Similarly, a writer such as Arthur Stringer is generally better known for his Prairie fiction than for his novel *The City of Peril* (1923), which delves into the social, financial, and sexual politics of a modern metropolis.

Works of prose fiction by Florence Randal Livesay and Jessie Georgina Sime from the 1920s also depict the lived experiences of the modern city, and the social and economic challenges that accompanied changing gender and class roles. In her reading of J. G. Sime’s short story collection *Sister Woman*, for example, Sandra Campbell points to the influence of “the psychic and social pressures brought to bear against women as a result of the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation which Georgina Sime witnessed between 1907 and 1919 in Montreal” (Introduction *Sister*, vii–viii). Sime’s and Livesay’s portraits of women working and living in Canadian cities may complicate, however, the notion that “the war, and the industrialization of the modern state” led only to “alienation” (Malus *et al.* 64). By exploring the new possibilities that the twentieth-century metropolis and its technologies offered to women, Sime and Livesay provide another perspective on the sense of social and personal estrangement that we have come to regard as a prominent feature of the literature of the day.¹ Modernism has been generally associated with “an aesthetic centered on neutrality and apolitical objectivity,” and a “valorization of style over content” (Ardis 5), but Sime and Livesay depend less on literary experimentation and more on realistic depictions of women’s lives. In other words, while responding to similar material conditions, Sime and Livesay are not necessarily part of or participants in an artistic revolution influenced by “the men of 1914”—Pound, Lewis, Eliot, and Joyce (B.K. Scott 79). By depicting the complicated experience of urban modernity rather than engaging with an imported modernist aesthetic, their works present us with an opportunity to revisit our definitions of modernism and to acknowledge other perspectives on the time and the literary responses that it entailed.²

The limits of traditional definitions of modernism become particularly significant in readings of J. G. Sime’s works, including those that tend to downplay her twentieth-century context. For example, Sandra Campbell and Lorraine McMullen situate Sime’s writing in relation to turn-of-the-century New Woman fiction, despite its publication during and after World

War I (Introduction, *New Women* 14). Misao Dean also places Sime's *Sister Woman* (1919) in a *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic category, even as she acknowledges that Sime's stories "differ from much New Woman writing in including the experience of working-class women and prostitutes as well as the middle-class 'business woman'" (73). While Gerald Lynch connects the effects of the city to the form and content of Sime's fiction (63–64, 68), his readings link her work to late nineteenth-century Fabianism. Lindsey McMaster's exploration of Sime's working women also emphasizes the effects of industrialization (20–21), but she too places Sime's stories in a turn-of-the-century context. It seems that when we view modernist writing only as aesthetic rebellion, wartime trauma, and wasteland cities, other explorations of urban modernity and modern subjectivity, especially those by women, are read in relation to earlier literary trends, not modernism.

Because views and "formulations" of the city and its inhabitants are affected by gender (Parsons 7) as well as by other factors, we need a different lens through which we can perceive a range of literary responses to the growth of the metropolis, to the opportunities as well as the problems created by industrialization, to the transformation of gender and class roles, especially in the wake of World War I, and to the effects of these social changes on perception and subjectivity. The works of both Sime and Livesay present us with an opportunity to engage critically with traditional visions of Canadian modernism. Sime's *Our Little Life* (1921), set in Toronto, and Livesay's *Savour of Salt* (1927), set in Montreal ("Regalia"), indicate the influence of metropolitan spaces on women's identities. Caught in the larger demographic shift from the country to the city, Livesay's Aine Finnigan and Sime's Katie McGee confront, resist, subvert, and adhere to the expectations of the urban and rural environments in which they circulate. Both women utilize social structures creatively, employing what Michel de Certeau has called a "tactics" of cultural engagement, whereby they are able to "use, manipulate, and divert" the spaces and norms of urban life (30). The modern city in particular is figured as both an enabling and a threatening place for women; it is neither a wholly positive nor a fully negative alternative to the rural societies from which the women have come. Their marginalized positions in the metropolis at first alienate them from others, but eventually the women are able to forge personal connections and local networks of support, indicating the potential for community as well as autonomy in the city. By presenting the experiences of women in the Canadian city, Sime and Livesay participate in a widespread, multinational response to the modern metropolis. Instead

of privileging formal experimentation over material conditions, or depicting only the alienation of individuals in the modern urban world, they focus on the internal contradictions of the city, exploring in Canada the fragmented and shifting nature of modernity and its effects on women's identities.

Both *Our Little Life* and *Savour of Salt* feature Irish-Catholic protagonists who migrate to the city and experience a Canada transformed by industrialization and urbanization. A predominantly rural society had become by 1921 a nation balanced between rural and urban communities, and based upon an economy that "had been reorganized on industrial, corporate, and metropolitan lines" (Kerr 67). Migration from the country—and from other countries—to the major Canadian cities of Montreal and Toronto in the early twentieth century had a profound influence on individuals' personal and public identities (74). While as "*conceptual*" categories, the binary of rural and urban "breaks down," since the terms are "constantly in negotiation with each other" (New 158; italics in original), the material experience of the modern metropolis signaled a significant break with the socio-economic organization of the country and its inhabitants. The difference between rural and urban societies is reflected most powerfully by the difference in the kinds of community that the spaces engender. According to Georg Simmel, for example, the "money economy" of the early twentieth-century industrial centre alienated the worker according to his or her function in society and disrupted traditional interpersonal relationships (411). The division and specialization of labour led to a social "structure" based upon "the highest impersonality" as well as "a highly personal subjectivity" (413). The new sense of autonomy, produced by the anonymity of the individual within the city and his or her role within the larger economic structure, was thus accompanied by the subject's sense of anxiety regarding his or her singular and alienated position in the midst of the masses (418). The "discontinuity" of the metropolis, "the rapid crowding of changing images," and "the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions" added to the individual's sense of being alone in a disordered world (410). As Simmel observes, "one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd" (418). The city may involve interactions among different people, classes, cultures, and ethnicities, but these dealings are characterized by what Raymond Williams identifies as a "lack of connection" that arises from the absence of the traditional organization of an agrarian community (245).

Though Toronto and Montreal were minor cities compared to 1920s New York, Paris, and London, they nonetheless offered in Canada a modern

metropolitan experience that had profound effects on the form and content of early twentieth-century Canadian literature.³ Though *Savour of Salt* is the main prose text in which Livesay presents the sense of urban disjunction and disorientation, her other works indicate that this shift in perspective continued to hold her attention. In her poem "Time" (1923), for example, a former rival hails the speaker of the verse, making overt the arbitrary nature of human contact in the unnamed city environment: "Caught in an eddy of a crowd / I heard one call my name aloud." Memories of a previous time and space erupt in the midst of this new setting, which has refigured the relationship: it is not enmity but temporary community that the speaker encounters in the scene. Momentary conversations and connections are thus possible, but seem fleeting and random, symbols of discontinuity rather than representations of lasting or stable bonds. Sime too explores throughout her career the effects of urban settings on the individual, on the society, and on literary style. As she suggests in this passage from her prose study, *Orpheus in Québec*, time and space and flux are the essence of the city:

The constant brushing against one another, in familiar daytime association, of the most discrepant elements (such as could never have encountered one another in daily life before this age of rapid transit and the ubiquitous influences of the radio and the movie), the chance meetings and partings of men and women of widely dissimilar personalities and outlooks, the half-understandings and total misunderstandings of the ideas and ideals by which the various lives are swayed—all this may be admirably dealt with in rapid pencil-sketches or stori-ettes or possibly in radio-serials. . . . (44)

Sime's list of external stimuli recreates the overwhelming sensory impact of the city, whose pace is best reflected in media forms capable of reproducing the speed and fragmentation of modernity. Like film, which she invokes here as a metaphor of the quick-moving and diverse crowd, the metropolis is a coherent spatial entity but composed of disparate parts placed in rapid juxtaposition. Sime suggests that a sense of community will eventually result from the "gradual amalgamation" of these fragmented parts in the context of Montreal (44). But for the moment, her vision of the modern city is characterized by motion and social transition, where the individual's sense of identity and place is continually disrupted and must be constantly recreated in a changed and changing landscape.

The role of women in Canadian cities is particularly important in the 1920s, not only in terms of the political power many gained from the suffrage movement and from their work during the War, but also in relation to the increasing numbers and visibility of women in the metropolis. Changes

in technology and in the economic structure of the nation led to “a massive influx of women into the workforce, mainly in the manufacturing industries” (“Making History”). By 1921, women represented almost 17% of the labour force. A further 36% increase in Canadian women’s employment through the 1920s (Vipond 6) saw women continuing to move from domestic service into “industrial, retail and clerical sectors” (Campbell and McMullen 15). The fact that about 90% of these women were single (Vipond 6) and living alone in the metropolis had a profound effect on the power dynamics of the city. Carolyn Strange, for instance, argues that widespread cultural anxiety regarding industrialization and urbanization took the form of a reaction against the increasing presence of women in Toronto between 1880–1930. Single “girls” working, living, and playing in the city became connected in the public imagination with “immorality” and “danger” (10). Their professional independence was linked to unsupervised and thus illicit sexuality in public spaces such as the Canadian National Exhibition and Hanlan’s Point on the Toronto Islands (123). In reality, their occupational choices were accompanied by varying degrees of economic, personal, and social marginalization, since the women’s precarious financial position, resulting from often low-paying and non-unionized jobs, made them vulnerable not just to exploitation but to increased surveillance. New kinds of “regulation,” both formal and informal, appeared at this time, whether in the shape of policewomen or of organizations such as the YWCA and Big Sisters (15). The modern city, with its new economic structures, new infrastructures, and new attitudes towards women’s work may have led to increased autonomy and visibility for women, but it also prompted new kinds of policing in Toronto and elsewhere.

The power of the law and its effect on single women in the city are what Livesay addresses in *Savour of Salt*. Though better known as Dorothy Livesay’s mother, Florence Randal Livesay was a significant figure in the early twentieth-century Canadian literary scene, publishing poetry, prose, and journalism, especially in the 1910s and 1920s. Livesay’s work reflects her awareness of the different societies that were coming into conflict in the modern world, as well as the different communities that were being affected by modernization. The first half of the novel is set in an Irish farming settlement in rural Ontario presided over by a Catholic priest; the second half takes place in what appears to be the less constrictive space of Toronto. The Catholic community in which Aine Finnigan is raised is thus contrasted to the Protestant city, and the family-centred countryside seems to be at odds

with the fast-moving metropolis. Aine's love interests symbolize the tension between these two worlds and their distinctive norms. Larry is expected to become a Catholic priest, retaining the traditions of the country; Van Bradburn, on the other hand, is a Protestant who is engaged to Aine's city cousin, and who uses modern technology in his dentistry practice.

Both men are portrayed as being unavailable to Aine, as are the two communities they represent to which Aine herself does not fully belong. Indeed, Livesay depicts Aine as a "Child of Twilight" (3). However, it is Aine's liminal social and cultural status that enables her to adjust to a changing world. An orphan, Aine represents the autonomous modern subject who is able to realize the promise of the city without rejecting the nation's rural roots. It is not, however, an easy road. From the beginning of the novel, her family history puts Aine at odds with the imperatives of the rural community in which she has been raised. As her adoptive parent, Mrs. Finnigan, explains at the end of *Savour of Salt*, Aine's biological mother transgressed the laws of the Settlement:

Who was her mother? A half-crazed creature, wandering up and down the fields of a town fifty miles away—an English girl. And Desmond Finnigan would have married her right enough—when it was too late—and would have brought her to my house. I said: "I'll take the baby, but you keep that woman away from the place or it will be the worse for her." (219)

As well as establishing Aine's illegitimacy, the passage summarizes the key divisions in her identity: the mother is "half-crazed"; the daughter is only half-Irish; Aine has known only half her story for most of the novel. Even her given name, Lorraine, is split, as Aine's identity reflects her birth parents' unofficial, unrecognized, and unsuccessful union.

Despite her ties to the community and to her adoptive family, Aine seems destined to become a reflection of her mother. As the Settlement's priest tells her, Aine is one of his "failures": "For all you seem so docile you're a little rebel at heart and I've always known it. Here you've been brought up very strict . . . but you'd leave us tomorrow, Aine, though you'd always love and understand us" (152–53). Though he has enough influence to rupture her friendship with Larry, he cannot force her to remain within the community or to follow its traditions. Indeed, the priest's evaluation of Aine proves prophetic: after his death, she leaves the Settlement altogether for the liberating opportunities of the city. But in this environment too, her split identity and her inability to conform to the communities in which she circulates lead to another crisis. Aine and Van Bradburn break a social

taboo: when Van's fiancée Beatrice, who is Aine's cousin, is not at home, Van takes Aine for a drive in the country. Once they traverse the city limits, the car runs out of gas and they are stranded in the countryside. After receiving help from a farmer, they arrive back at the city house, but at an outrageous hour. Aine is ostracized by her cousin, by her aunt, and by all whom she knows. Her reputation in shreds, she is taken away from the house by the urban counterpart of Father O'Shea: "a woman in the uniform of the Salvation Army" (182) who will place Aine "under some supervision for a time" (183). In the scene, Aine's identity is erased. Neither part of the city nor part of the country, and yet the focus of their laws, she ceases to be a subject and instead becomes an object upon which power is exercised. She is moved "mechanically" by larger forces through a nightmare world characterized by division and liminality:

The door closed with a bang and Aine as in a dream was led to a taxi that seemed to have sprung up by magic just outside the door. She was so tired that nothing mattered, not even the key grating on the outside of the lock of her door. She flung herself on the hard little white bed and was asleep in a second.

Aine's freedom of movement has been marked as sexual misconduct, and she is punished accordingly, as she becomes an anonymous inmate of the city under the supervision of the Salvation Army.

In this scene, Livesay emphasizes the key differences between the power structures of the city and the country. Though sympathetic, and indeed "an old friend of the family," the "matron" who supervises Aine's division from her family and friends indicates the increasing institutionalization of behavioural norms in urban areas (183). The Sally Ann represents the official enforcement of mainstream expectations regarding class and gender roles. In contrast, the priest in the Settlement represents a local form of authority, embodying the community's history, culture, and religious traditions. Where the priest supplements the superstitions of the matriarchs of the community, the matron suggests the alienation of power from personal contexts, as her uniform conflates religion, civil law, and military might. The forms of punishment associated with the two environments also differ: whereas Aine's mother is exiled from the Settlement, Aine will be reformed into a more acceptable member of the urban society. Her work becomes her "gospel" (183), as she is incorporated into the Salvation Army's urban rescue mission. Assigned a job as a waitress in a tea-room, she is separated from both the Finnigans and from Van's company, and removed from the communities that have given her a sense of personal and not just professional

identity. The result is an insecurity and an uncertainty that emphasize her sense of internal division: "Aine, finding herself in a new world, ached with the sense of the old one left all unfinished, with ragged edges" (185). Her position in the transitory space of the restaurant is thus symbolic of her position in the metropolis, where interpersonal relationships are replaced by monetary exchanges in impersonal spaces: "Aine began to hate the surging crowds, in which she was daily lost, as she had never detested the farm" (185–86). In the Settlement Aine is limited by her family history; in the city she is reduced to an anonymous economic role.

Livesay suggests, however, that the alienating flux of the city can lead to possibilities as well as limitations. Since the space of the metropolis is based upon the concept of autonomy, the individual can exercise power within its social structures and infrastructures in order to make opportunities realities. Thus, though Aine is placed in a regimented job, she finds that she "like[s] the work amazingly" (184). Her attitude towards Mrs. Plaiçe's boarding house is similarly positive. At first, the boarding house with its separate apartments seems to represent the restrictions and boundaries involved in the larger city. But Livesay shows moments of connection among the residents that break down barriers and suggest new kinds of bonds. On Christmas Eve, for instance, the Protestant landlady gives her Catholic tenant a candle which, though unblest, signals the crossing of religious boundaries (187); her aunt makes the journey from the Settlement to the city for a visit (188); her "fellow-roomer," Miss Sillifant, offers to do her hair (189). These different relationships and identities arise from the very organization of space in the urban setting, where the estrangement of the individual from a traditional social order is countered by the multiple connections that become possible in this new environment.

The climax of Livesay's novel is predicated upon this dynamic, where, ironically, Aine's punishment leads to her reward, as her very anonymity in the city enables her to reconnect with Van. Her position as a waitress may signal her alienation from her rural community, but the resulting autonomy and distance from the community's restrictive norms leads to social mobility in form of a renewed relationship with her lover and with her family. It is in the public space of the tea-room that Van Bradburn's sister, Letty, happens to see Aine, and though Van arrives at the restaurant too late, he sees Aine catch the streetcar, and manages to board it behind her. In a specifically urban fantasy, written as if viewed from the street, the lover sees the object of his desire in the crowd and follows her through the maze of bodies:

“He had fought his way to her, touched her on the shoulder; they were hanging on the same strap. Aine looked as if she were going to topple backward, and a curve in the rails nobly swept her in the proper direction. She fell into his arms” (208). Here, Livesay suggests not only that personal connections undercut the alienation of the city, but that personal contact is made possible by the physical and social organization of the modern metropolis, and the increasingly important place of women within it. The city itself—its streets, its shops, its public transit systems—enables the reunion of Aine and Van, and the creation of a new social order. At the end, the newlyweds travel between the Settlement and the city on a train, symbolizing a new Canadian union that links and balances rural and urban traditions.

In Livesay’s novel, the problems and possibilities of the metropolis relate to the structure of the modern city itself: not just the gendered social structures through which Aine is punished and rewarded, but the physical spaces that both separate and bring together Van and Aine. In Jessie Georgina Sime’s *Our Little Life*, however, the anonymity of the individual in the metropolis leads to a powerful sense of anxiety that often overshadows the protagonist’s sense of autonomy. If Livesay reaffirms the ability of the individual to ride the crest of 1920s urban change and renewal, making personal connections and overcoming obstacles at an individual level, Sime emphasizes the citizen’s struggles to remain afloat in a shifting and alienating urban society. In *Our Little Life*, the train tracks and “the electric car-line” in Katie McGee’s neighbourhood signal the possibility of boundary-crossings, as they do in Livesay’s novel, but their promise of mobility is overshadowed by Sime’s focus on the apartment building and the rooms in which individuals seem to be trapped (xi). The tenants’ fortunes are tied to the fictional neighbourhood at O’Neil Street and Drayton Place, which declines from being an area of “good” houses in the 1860s (vii), to being one of respectable apartments at the turn of the century, finally becoming a kind of slum by 1917. Katie McGee’s own slide in social position after the death of her mother echoes the buildings’ fate, and it appears that she is caught in social and economic systems beyond her control.

Through Katie McGee, Sime explores how hegemonic discourses are experienced by citizens on an immediate and personal level, as individual resistance and local bonds seem to pale in comparison to the metanarratives of industrialization and capitalism. Her depiction of a thinly disguised Montreal suggests the complexities involved in negotiating ethnicity and religion, as well as class and gender, in a modern urban setting. Like Aine

Finnigan, Katie McGee has a bifurcated identity. She is an anglophone within a city that saw its boundaries change and its francophone population expand in the first decades of the twentieth century (Gordon 40). She is divided between her distant history as an Irish citizen and her present status as a Canadian, and her conflicted views of immigration suggest the continuing power of the Empire as well as its fragmentation (Watt xxviii-xxix).⁴ Katie also indicates the increasingly common division between a rural past and an urban present: "She came straight off the land . . . and the few modern ideas of the city she had plastered on to herself were anachronisms" (104). An unmarried Catholic seamstress of forty-six, Katie is consistently caught between her reliance upon inherited beliefs and mores, and her experience of contemporary modern realities. Family traditions regarding her daughterly duties have divided Katie from previous suitors: "It had been a choice between her mother and Tully" (57). But her current loneliness causes her to question her dutiful obedience to the family's expectations: "Had she been right?" (57). Money divides Katie from her middle-class sister, who offers her charity: "I ain't a *beggar!*" (75; italics in original). But Katie's pride—"she had ever since steadily and strenuously refused to see her sister"—may lead to her isolation from a caring community (75). Her Catholic faith involves Katie in an argument with an employer: "She felt that Mrs. Barclay in desecrating her Lord had desecrated her" (67). Katie's religious outrage is complicated, however, by her financial and emotional dependence upon the Barclay household: "She felt as if she could never go back to Wellington Road . . . as if she must forgo for evermore all that solid comfort and kindness, never even carry home baskets with cakes and home-baked bread and things for tea any more" (68).

In these episodes, social and economic marginalization is tied to the hierarchies and assumptions of the anglophone city neighbourhoods in which Katie moves. Her working-class status, her Irish background, and her Catholicism are at odds with the ideals that her modern society, as well as its conservative English-speaking elements, seem to promulgate.⁵ Social mobility, for instance, may be figured as being both possible and desirable in this commodity-oriented world: indeed, the second Mrs. Glassridge who hires Katie to make her clothes was a manicure girl "until Mr. Glassridge one fine day caught sight of her and wrought a transformation-scene" (83). But such ascensions are rare, and working-class immigrants like Miss McGee and even her English-born neighbour, Robert Fulton, are unlikely to be upwardly mobile. When he sees commercial goods through shop and car

windows, for instance, and knows that they are inaccessible, “something of the anarchist would rise up in Robert Fulton; a desire would seize him to go out and break through the window of the ly-mousine” (128). In Sime’s novel, newcomers to the city and the nation realize that the system will not change for them, despite their attempts to realize its promises and demands.

Although Sime points to the disjunction between upper- and working-class neighbourhoods, and between cultural fantasies and lived realities, she also stresses the enabling differences between her characters’ public or professional roles and their personal lives. While as Miss McGee, she is subordinated in the moneyed English and Protestant sections of Montreal in which she works, as Katie McGee, she is part of another community. Just as her neighbourhood is located within the larger metropolis, and her building within the neighbourhood, and her apartment within the building, Katie’s identity is grounded in her relationships with the people who immediately surround her. Her “little life” is centred primarily in her friendship with Robert Fulton. Miss McGee is a “great believer in keeping oneself to oneself” (13), but she opens her room to the younger man, who comes for dinner every night and regards it as “an oasis” (14) in an otherwise alienating landscape. The two are divided by their inherited identities; further, Katie’s unrequited and almost acknowledged love for Robert is at odds with his view of Miss McGee as “just a kind elderly thing of no particular sex” (52). And yet, in depicting Robert’s reliance upon Katie’s kindness and support, Sime suggests the persistence of community and the new forms that social connections take in the modern city. Social barriers are not deconstructed in the novel; indeed, it is Robert’s gentlemanly, British background that seems to attract Miss McGee’s admiration in the first place. But such culturally constructed hierarchies are countered by moments of sympathy that arise from the friends’ meetings. These two individuals, who in former days and in other places would have had little in common with each other, come to depend upon each other. The apartment building thus represents the complexities of the metropolis, whether exemplified by Montreal, New York, or London, and the “polysemy of place” that enables different experiences of urban modernity, where individuals can both comply with and resist official mappings of space and identity (Radice 19). Though the physical structures of the city symbolize the powerful social systems that alienate individuals, the apartments are also places of refuge and interpersonal connections, and offer a sense of local community that undermines the divisive, official hierarchies of ethnicity, religion, gender, and class.

The hegemonic discourses that characterize Sime's vision of the modern city are undercut in a rather different way when the worldwide influenza epidemic of 1918 strikes. Affecting all classes and sections of the city, it causes Miss McGee's wealthy clients to fall ill, along with the artists, labourers, and drug dealers who live in the apartments. The epidemic crystallizes Katie's resistance to larger social imperatives, as she rejects, albeit somewhat reluctantly, her previous assumptions regarding morality and social status. She nurses not only the gentlemanly Robert but also the prostitutes and "chorus-girls" who live in the basement of the apartments (354). This experience changes her view of these women and of the value of respectability:

"Would ye want me come set be ye here," Miss McGee added after a moment—as her eyes met the frightened eye of the third of the bunch of prostitutes that she had so bitterly decried. "Will I come spend the noight with ye, eh?" Miss McGee said: and, in response to what she read in the frightened eyes that looked into hers, she added, "Wait jes' a minnut. . . . I'll see you through. I'll be back. I shan't be a minnut." (370)

This is social rebellion on a local level, enabled by the space of the building itself, and prompted by Katie's recognition of another woman's pain, fear, and illness.

The larger change in Katie's life, however, results from Robert's death. When he succumbs to influenza, Katie must re-form her sense of identity, which for so long has been based upon his company and companionship. Instead of choosing to leave the apartment building and move to her sister's suburban home, Katie decides to remain in the city: "she had to go back to Penelope's Buildings—and *live there*" (388; italics in original). In her decision, she reaffirms the value of her position in the community, whether in her professional role as a seamstress, or in terms of her personal connections both to the tenants and to the women whose clothes she makes. It is to maintain her sense of autonomy that she returns, but she comes back also to a community, though one that differs from the hierarchical upper-class neighbourhoods of her clients, or the organized suburbia of her sister. The nature of this new metropolitan community is realized most strongly when, at the end of the novel, Katie is coming home on the streetcar. It is packed with workers from the munitions factory, and after a man gives up his seat to her, they exchange pleasantries:

The same old things. The same old human things that we say to one another, generation in and generation out. As Miss McGee replied to this neighbour of hers who had wished to help her, who had shown her good-will, she felt—it was

inexplicable—as if her feeling to life changed. It *wasn't* a mess. The world was a mess, but not life. (393; italics in original)

Paradoxically, her sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and apartment building stems from these seemingly random moments of personal contact that are enabled by the ostensibly alienating infrastructures of the inner city. The modern city remains an ambivalent environment for this woman despite the “good-will” of her fellow workers, since its systems, citizens, and businessmen often undercut her ability to earn her own living. But the scene on the streetcar encapsulates Katie’s ability to survive in the city through a combination of independence and communal connections, through which she is able both to assert her own local identity and to compromise with the larger structures by which her life is bounded.

Instead of indicating only the alienating aspects of the metropolis for women at this time, Sime and Livesay emphasize the process of negotiation that accompanies the assertion of identity in the modern city. Urban modernity involves an altered sense of subjectivity and new kinds of contact, including those based on moments of random personal connection within alienating public structures. By engaging creatively with existing class structures, gender roles, and social norms, the female protagonists of the novels retain a certain amount of autonomy but also forge bonds with individuals, whether in the boarding houses or the streetcars of the city. Sime’s and Livesay’s modernism stems from a similar tactics of cultural engagement. The authors’ explorations of women’s positions in the 1920s metropolis involve a perspective on the modern world that is not necessarily adapted from imported modernisms, or derived from nineteenth-century urban identities and literatures. Instead, they depict the complicated power dynamics of the metropolis and of subjectivity itself, presenting a vision of modernity that depends upon compromise rather than control, and fluidity rather than stability. Their fiction may supplement our scripting of the Canadian canon, then, not only by challenging our location of modernism in the literary and geographical margins of the country, but also by emphasizing the diversity of classed and gendered experiences that led to a range of modernisms in Canada.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Edmund Wilson’s seminal reading of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*: “In our post-War world of shattered institutions, strained nerves and bankrupt ideals, life no longer seems serious or coherent—we have no belief in the things we do and consequently we have no heart for them” (106). In the context of Canadian literature, Willmott

- refers to “a modern relativity of the self estranged from any identity essentialized or naturalized by a rural way of life and its traditions” (302).
- 2 Exploring other forms of modernism becomes an important task, particularly if the canon of Canadian modernist authors has been predicated upon “the marginalization and exclusion of feminine, emotional, domestic art forms, and the idealization and centralization of masculine, abstract, public art forms” (Kelly 78).
 - 3 According to the *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921*, the populations of Montreal and Toronto were 618 506 and 521 893 respectively, followed by Winnipeg at 179 087. In the same year, the population of Paris was recorded as 2 906 472, and the population of the London area was 7 386 755. New York City and its boroughs had a population of approximately 5 621 000 in 1920 (*Demographia*).
 - 4 While most immigration to Canada at this time stemmed from the British Isles, “whose people are regarded as the very best types” (*Montreal* 148), Montreal experienced a dramatic increase in ethnic diversity in the first decades of the twentieth century (see Gordon 37–38).
 - 5 Antoine Sirois indicates in his study of the literature of Montreal the sense of division among English-speaking inhabitants of the city, as well as between anglophone and francophone societies. He describes a character from Mavis Gallant’s *An Unmarried Man’s Summer*, for instance, as being stunned “quand il rencontre une personne convenable qui n’est ni Anglaise, ni Écossaise, ni protestante” (52). Elaine Kalman Naves has also discussed Gwethalyn Graham’s depictions of anti-Semitism in Montreal (62–63).

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