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The Afterlife of the City: Reconsidering Urban Poetic Practice

Maia Joseph

What does it mean to write the contemporary city? More specifically, what role does the poet play in cultivating or reconfiguring an urban imaginary? This essay examines how two Vancouver-based poets respond to such questions — Lisa Robertson[1] in the essay-poems[2] collected in *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, and Meredith Quartermain in her poetry collection *Vancouver Walking*. Both poets establish a strong connection to that traditional domain of the urban poet, the street, but both also reconsider the role of the poet as street-level observer. This role has been conceptualized most famously by Walter Benjamin, who associates the urban poet with the ragpicker and the practice of *bricolage* (*Charles Baudelaire* 17-21, 79-81). For Benjamin, the prototypical urban poet is Charles Baudelaire, whose own interest in the ragpicker inspired the comparison, but elements of the peripatetic urban figure that Benjamin describes manifest in a broad range of poetic work and literary personas, from William Blake and William Wordsworth to the beat poets and beyond.[3] Vancouver has its own rich, if less lengthy, tradition of poets inspired by the urban walk and the space of the street — a short list might include Earle Birney, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, Roy Kiyooka, Bud Osborn, and Wayde Compton.[4] Robertson and Quartermain, for their part, are clearly invested, to varying degrees and in distinct ways, in the tradition of the poet who explores the fringe and forgotten spaces of the city, gathering and telling marginalized stories. But they also query their positioning in such spaces, interrogating the aims and impact of their work. As they reconceptualize their role as urban artists, they engage foundational ethical questions about how to live and relate to others in the city, and they make self-critique a substantial component of writing in and about contemporary Vancouver.

In producing creative descriptions of interaction in city spaces, Robertson and Quartermain demonstrate a commitment to the cultivation of urbanity, as the cultural critic Liam Kennedy defines the

term.[5] "Urbanity" — especially in its adjectival form, "urbane" — often denotes refinement or elegance of manner, wit, and polish, especially of city people. However, the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us that the word has also long been used simply to refer to the "state, condition, or character" of city life, and Kennedy develops his conceptualization of the term from this more generalized definition. For Kennedy — whose thinking is founded in the work of seminal American urban studies commentators Richard Park, Jane Jacobs, Richard Sennett, William Whyte, and Marshall Berman — "urbanity" refers to "the phenomenon of collectivity which emerges from the close proximity of strangers and face-to-face relations in public urban space" (Kennedy 3). It implies a valorization of "the multifarious forms of social interaction and interdependence in the city — the erotic and aesthetic variety of street life, the close encounters with strangers, the freedoms of access and movement in public spaces — positing these as the very essence of urban life and the necessary conditions of democratic citizenship" (3). Kennedy argues that a "crisis of urbanity" has occurred in American cities. The notion of any pluralistic collectivity associated with urbanity is now, he suggests, "broadly questioned as the close proximity of strangers in the city refuses to cohere into a civic unity and public space becomes increasingly privatized, commodified and militarized" (3). He proposes that while a highly idealized notion of urbanity has been commodified for primarily "white" middle-class consumption, the most pervasive affective orientation in the contemporary city is fear, which manifests as avoidance, denial, and the move toward enclosure.

The city of Vancouver differs somewhat in its demographics, development history, and modes of governance from the American cities examined by Kennedy. Importantly, the American problem of widespread middle-class migration from the city centre, which entrenched socioeconomic and racialized divides between the central and suburban city over the second half of the twentieth century, was anticipated and addressed by Vancouver city planners through a range of zoning and other planning decisions that sought (with qualified success) to achieve a mixed demographic and vibrant sense of community in both the downtown core and surrounding neighbourhoods.[6] However, despite its often celebrated planning and development history — indeed, partly because of it — Vancouver has not escaped characteristic negative impacts of later twentieth-century urban change. An intensified culture

of consumption has emerged in the city, accompanied by growing socio-economic polarization (especially in and around Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood) and widespread gentrification (Ley, *New Middle Class* 15; see also Blomley). New condominium developments have often drawn on a commodified version of urbanity as a marketing tool; this version ignores the necessary tensions of encounter integral to Kennedy's conceptualization of urbanity.[7] Glenn Deer cites Douglas Coupland's *City of Glass* — a collection of annotated photographs that bridges the guidebook and coffee-table book genres — as a key example of commodified urbanity in Vancouver. Coupland, Deer argues, portrays Vancouver as a city of "comfortable cultural fusions and leisurely imbibed vistas," neglecting more problematic or controversial aspects of city spaces and city life (Deer 139).

In *Imagining the Modern City*, cultural critic James Donald proposes that the decline of urbanity might be countered in part through the cultivation of "thick descriptions" of urban experience; he argues that the descriptive enterprises of a range of commentators — from Baudelaire to Virginia Woolf, Friedrich Engels to Jane Jacobs — have been crucial not only in developing an understanding of urban relations but also in nurturing urbanity. Donald emphasizes the importance of continually creating new descriptions of urban experience, suggesting that such descriptions help city dwellers become better able to apprehend and appreciate "the always unpredictable, sometimes painful, and often intensely pleasurable give and take of everyday dealings with neighbours" (169). In other words, these descriptions help city dwellers become creatively attuned to the project of being together in the city — of living in proximity to, and sharing space with, a complicated and varied assortment of strangers.

However, descriptions of urban dynamics produced by artists, and specifically by poets, have often been neglected in popular and scholarly conversations about the city — especially in Canada, where urban writing (though quite plentiful) has traditionally been overlooked in discussions of Canadian literature (Ivison and Edwards 8-12). In Canada and elsewhere, moreover, the practices of urban artists, and the authority and value of their work, have been increasingly debated by scholars since the 1970s. Perhaps most importantly, a tradition of social sciences scholarship focusing on the role of the artist in processes of urban redevelopment has grown steadily following the publication of Sharon Zukin's

foundational study *Loft Living*, which figured the presence and work of artists in specific urban spaces as stimuli for gentrification. Neatly summarizing and expanding on more than two decades of work on this subject, the geographer David Ley argues via theoretical apparatus supplied by Pierre Bourdieu, and drawing on data from Vancouver,[8] that artists often transform neglected districts into spaces of high cultural capital; this leads to an economic valorization that results in the inflation of property prices ("Artists" 2540). Ley pays particular attention to the aestheticizing practice of *bricolage* and reconceptualizes Benjamin's portrayal of the artist as ragpicker. In Ley's interpretation (which is indebted to Graeme Gilloch's notion of "redemptive practice"), urban artists create cultural capital by making meaning out of the "commonplace" and "redemptively transform[ing] junk to art" (2540). In so doing, they confer value on the sites that provide the location or the raw material for their work and open up the possibility for what investors might describe as "redemption" in the real estate market. In other words, artists, while often intending otherwise, play a part in making such sites more palatable to middle- and eventually upper-class buyers.[9] Ley proposes that although artists tend to interrogate "the borders of conventional middle-class life," they also function as the middle class's "advancing, colonizing arm" (2533).

In invoking Benjamin, Ley's study of artists and gentrification is connected to the critique of the *flâneur*, that much-storied idle wanderer of city streets. Though the concept of *flânerie* circulated widely in nineteenth-century Paris, Benjamin has been credited with "almost single-handedly recover[ing] the figure of the *flâneur* for 20th-century criticism," primarily through his work on Baudelaire (Gluck 53). The *flâneur*'s relationship to the city has been associated with idleness, voyeurism, social alienation and anxiety, and distraction; in Benjamin's formulation, the *flâneur* ultimately meets "his destiny in the triumph of consumer capitalism" as his wandering of Parisian streets is transformed into window shopping (Shaya 47). Even as writers and scholars have, in recent decades, expanded the potential and range of *flânerie* beyond traditional boundaries of gender, race, and sexuality — describing and imagining (among others) the female *flâneur* (or *flâneuse*), the "ethnic" *flâneur*, and the queer *flâneur* — numerous critics have continued to emphasize a characteristic disjunction between this figure's aestheticiz-

ing sensibility and his or her ability for meaningful and productive engagement in urban life.[10]

The critique of the *flâneur*, like the conversation that has figured artists as harbingers of gentrification, haunts artists working in and on the contemporary city and problematizes the aims, effects, and merit of their work. As Ley's study of artists and gentrification makes clear, the positioning of many contemporary artists continues to resemble that of the nineteenth-century Parisian *flâneurs,* who scraped together a living by producing sketches, vignettes, articles, and poetic descriptions of city life for a bourgeois audience, thus "occup[ying] an uncertain social position" at the edge of the dominant class and serving as cultural translators and barometers for that class (Donald 45). Still, while a degree of complicity in processes of urban restructuring may be inevitable, the street remains a necessary space of inquiry and action for many artists invested in urban ethics and politics, given the threats to diverse and vibrant forms of public life described by critics such as Kennedy. Reading Robertson's and Quartermain's respective texts, I find that increased awareness of the fraught role of the artist seems to have invited a more self-reflexively critical approach to the project of writing the city. Both authors recognize and explore their complicated role in the ongoing transformation of the city, producing works that testify to careful reflection on urban poetic practice.

In the acknowledgements section that opens her *Soft Architecture* collection, Robertson notes that her essays "reflect Vancouver's changing urban texture during a period of development roughly bracketed by the sale of the Expo '86 site by the provincial government and the 2003 acquisition by the province of the 2010 Winter Olympics" (n. pag.). "I watched the city of Vancouver dissolve in a fluid called money," Robertson remarks (1): "In this period of accelerated growth and increasingly globalizing economies, much of what I loved about this city seemed to be disappearing" (n. pag.). Significantly, she emphasizes the importance of critically examining her own responses to urban change. "I thought I should document the physical transitions I was witnessing in my daily life," she writes, "and *in this way question my own nostalgia* for the minor, the local, the ruinous; for decay" (n. pag.; emphasis added). Throughout the essays, Robertson repeatedly shifts from providing an account of the changing city, as she has experienced it, and moves into a self-conscious probing of the practice of poetic

description and her positioning as a poet-critic.[11] The collection offers not only an intricate, idiosyncratic portrait of Vancouver (Robertson includes historical studies of particular sites, riffs on features such as the city's diminutive fountains and abundant blackberry vines, and playful commentary on the leaky condominium problem[12]) but also a sustained investigation of what it means to come into contact with and make meaning in an urban environment.

Robertson's "Office for Soft Architecture" persona embeds a complicated engagement with the idea of the artist's complicity in urban restructuring, recalling both the term "soft gentrification" — whereby a neighbourhood is invaded and restructured by what appear to be fairly benign, local forces rather than the "hard" forces of global capital — and also Jonathan Raban's *Soft City*, an early treatise on the post-industrial urban experience, in which Raban celebrates the "soft," malleable qualities of the city that make it "amenable to a dazzling and libidinous variety of lives, dreams, [and] interpretations" (Raban 9). Famously, David Harvey, in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, charged Raban with a lack of self-consciousness regarding his own privileged social positioning and point of view (3). Robertson's decision to refer to herself as the Office — not as an individual subject — implies a critical relation to the lyrical "I"/eye that in urban literature can be traced back at least to Baudelaire.[13] Moreover, by cultivating the Office persona, and by including introductory notes listing the commissioning bodies and research tasks associated with each essay, Robertson foregrounds the work of the artist *as work*. In so doing, she emphasizes a sense of engagement in the Artistic Mode of Production, the term Zukin uses to describe artists' implication in a combination of institutional, industrial, commercial, and social demands and desires. Thus, when Robertson remarks, in one of her essays, that it "*suits* us to write in this raw city," her framing of her work as the Office allows us to read that "suiting" as the assuming of a particular professional identity, even as we also read the statement as an articulation of a more personal, affective relation to the city (25; emphasis added).

Robertson's Office for Soft Architecture persona also remembers the Office for Metropolitan Architecture and the writings of founding architect Rem Koolhaas. Her project is inspired by, but also in some ways inverts, what Koolhaas termed his "retroactive manifesto" for New York City, in which he sought to resurrect and develop a blueprint

for the ideal forms of architectural modernism in Manhattan. While Koolhaas focuses on structural design, Robertson, suspicious of stories that privilege "structural deepness" (*Soft* 17), attends instead to architectural style and various forms of urban texture — to the "pigmented, glazed, plastered, [and] carved" surfaces of the city (129). This focus allows Robertson to investigate the space where the perceiving body meets the surfaces of the material world. If we can say that she playfully "goes corporate" in cultivating her Office persona, she also returns the notion of the corporate to the scale of the body. Moreover, where Koolhaas attempts to retrieve the ideal structural forms of the past and develop new ones, Robertson advocates a more immediate and intimate relation to time and space, attending to the details of everyday experience in the city and to the poet-critic's work of observing and describing this experience. She proposes that through careful interpretative description of the city, the poet-critic — while not escaping complicity in dominant socioeconomic processes — might contribute to the opening up of the possibilities of urban life.

Operating in the realms of the body, affect, and everyday routine, Robertson is interested in how subjective experience is shaped by, but also exceeds or undermines, the dominant scripts of the city. In "The Value Village Lyric," for example, a trip to a second-hand garment store finds Robertson probing and pushing the limits of the figure of the *flâneur*, who (Benjamin argued) was ultimately distracted by the ubiquity of consumer goods in shop windows, slipping into what Robertson describes elsewhere as "the listlessness of scripted consumption" (*Soft* 234). "We cannot fix our object," Robertson writes in her Value Village piece:

> We are anxious and bored and must shop. With this scribbled grooming we thatch ourselves anew.
>
> We want an impure image that contradicts fixity. Something deliciously insecure: the sheath of a nerve. We go to the House of V to encounter the glimmering selvage of the popular. We handle retrospect labels and fibres. We analyze cut. We study change. We believe that the tactile limits of garments mark out our potential actions. . . . The garment italicizes the body, turns it into speech. (213-14)

Here, Robertson affirms complicity in commodified urbanity while,

at the same time, she explores the complexity of the experience, thinking outside of the script of consumption, and suggesting that clothing can serve as a space — limited but intimate and generative — for exploring and articulating agency and ethics. Inspired by designer Lilly Reich's remark that "clothes may . . . have metaphysical effects" (qtd. in McQuaid 17; qtd. in *Soft* 16), Robertson treats clothes as inhabitable entities to be studied, interpreted, and selected for their ability to express a particular sensibility — a feeling of relation to others and to the world. She also suggests that in handling the various clothes on display, we might begin to understand how, as Renu Bora puts it, "touch and physical pressure transform the materials one would like to know, assess, love" (99). Thatching the body, clothes demarcate a material but also metaphysical and affective threshold between self and other, self and world. As a Soft Architect, Robertson advocates the exploration of such relational spaces, encouraging a turn toward the question of how to engage with and in the world beyond the self.

Another significant threshold space in Robertson's project is the text itself. Robertson refers, as I noted, to the pieces in her *Soft Architecture* collection as "essays," and certainly they *are* essays in that they provide analysis and commentary on particular topics in prose form. They are, however, essays crafted with the care and skill of a poet. Victor Shklovsky memorably described poetry as having a "roughening" quality and function, a stylistic and formal texture that invites "prolong[ed] attention" (725-26). Robertson, in her *Soft Architecture* work, uses dense, highly connotative, and often sensual language; she pays keen attention to sound and movement to create pieces of urban description in which "Sociology becomes ornament, like a decorative scar-work" (*Soft* 218). Acutely aware of the ways in which language constructs subjects and their relations with the world, Robertson does not settle into the stance of the authoritative eyewitness or the empiricist collecting and communicating facts; rather, she recognizes and is interested in investigating the ways that description "makes difference," and thus "makes meaning" (Spiegelman 25). She both engages in and foregrounds what Willard Spiegelman, in *How Poets See the World*, terms "laborious observation" (25),[14] encouraging sustained attention to that threshold space where city transforms into text, and to the role of the poet-critic in this process of transformation.

Robertson, in effect, recognizes that her work as a poet-critic takes

on cultural value through the art of description — the art of creatively re-presenting the city by producing paper notes that assign or reassign value to particular sites and materials. "Practice description," Robertson advises in the collection's first essay, and then adds, "Description is mystical. It is afterlife because it is life's reflection or reverse" (16). In using the term "afterlife" to describe the practice of description Robertson is indebted to Benjamin, who in *The Arcades Project* spoke of the "afterlife of works" in positing a dialectical connection between his descriptive montage of Paris's past and political awakening in the present. Robertson, re-working Benjamin's formula, proposes that descriptive practices in the present can open up the space of the "future conditional" (149). The practice of description, for Robertson, includes not simply mimetically reflecting the city but also reflecting *on* the city — contemplating its histories, its present conditions, its possible futures.

Robertson, in other words, responds to her swiftly changing (indeed "dissolving") city by positing a form of heightened spatial awareness that is also an opening in time, a temporal re-orientation of self to world that makes room for contemplation. Subsequent to her advice to "practice description," she remarks, "We recommenders of present action have learned to say 'perhaps' our bodies produce space; 'perhaps' our words make a bunting canopy; 'perhaps' the hand-struck, palpable wall is an anti-discipline; 'perhaps' by the term 'everyday life' we also mean the potential" (16). She 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 and where "a latticework for civic thought" (239) might be built. Robertson suggests that her work, as poet-critic, is to "produce new time" — to foster an alternative, more contemplative temporality in the midst of (indeed, in defiance of) increasingly rapid change in the city (218). Her duty is also to "read" the city, to observe and describe it, to "deliriously misinterpret" it, and to diversify and circulate the potential scripts, styles, and tropes for dwelling and building (59).

Throughout her *Soft Architecture* pieces, Robertson repeatedly attends to and interrogates the seeming triviality of poetic description, emphasizing its "ornamental" quality — like an apparently "illegitimate, superfluous" blackberry vine it "garnish[es]" and "garland[s]" and "swag[s]" (125, 127) — and arguing that this quality does not, in fact, divorce poetic description from the realms of ethics and politics.

Robertson arrives at her conceptualization of urban description through a commitment to feminist politics that, in her earlier work, manifested in textual play with the ornamental qualities of classical rhetoric and genre. Stephen Collis observes in his study of *Debbie: An Epic*, *XEclogue*, and *The Weather* that Robertson "opens classical genre and rhetoric to its ornamental use of gender (shepherdesses, Nature as feminine, rhetorical nostalgia and sincerity)"; he demonstrates that such ornament is not merely superfluous or excessive but rather "the crucial site of the classical text's ideological content" (156). Collis shows that, as a feminist poet-critic, Robertson is interested in revealing and querying the morphological power hiding in "surface" features — whether these are the tropes used to "decorate" language or the clothes that shape bodies or the textiles, walls, and screens that demarcate spaces of domesticity and dwelling.

Robertson continues to develop this approach as an urban poet-critic in her *Soft Architecture* essays; she argues (following Gottfried Semper in *The Four Elements of Architecture*) that the "skin" of the city, "with its varieties of ornament, [is] specifically inflected with the role of representing ways of daily living" (*Soft* 129). She reveals or imagines the ideological content of a range of surface features: fountains "radiate a public logic of civic identity," or they are "corporate fantasies," or they gently "alleviate our cares" by producing "minor happiness," depending on how they fountain and how we look (54-55). The second-hand shirts at Value Village are "lyric structures cast aside" while they are also "profit" (217). The blackberry vines that "transform[] chain link and barbed wire [fences] to undulant green fruiting walls" are "Fordist," because they aim to "maximize[] distribution," and they are also "democratic" (127); as Robertson reads it, the blackberry vine "is an exemplary political decoration" that "trac[es] a mortal palimpsest of potential surfaces in acutely compromised situations, . . . showing us how to invent" (130). "This," she says, "is the serious calling of style" (130).

In encouraging ethical inquiry and gesturing to potential political stances through her practice of attentive, generative description, Robertson makes a provocative contribution to the conversation about the artist's role in urban restructuring — a conversation that has tended to separate aesthetics from ethics and politics. David Ley, for instance, begins his article on artists and gentrification by discussing the political dimension of Vancouver visual artist Carole Itter's work; however,

he then argues that the aestheticization of the city by artists such as Itter "redeems" particular sites for actors in the property market. He concludes by suggesting that the inadvertent role the artist sometimes plays in urban restructuring constitutes a "deeper irony" than any of the politicized juxtapositions that Itter deploys in her art (2542). Ultimately, it seems Ley's focus on what he calls, after Bourdieu, the "field of gentrification" proves rather totalizing: his model tends to assume that while the artist often plays a role in transforming perceptions of a particular neighbourhood, it is only a passive, aestheticizing role, rather than, potentially, an actively critical one that might encourage resistance to, or questioning of, particular forms and processes of urban change.

Conversely, other commentators, while acknowledging and examining the aesthetic dimension of urban art, demonstrate a tendency to privilege that art's engagement, or lack thereof, with politics. Art historian Rosalyn Deutsche, for instance, argues in her important book *Evictions* for what she describes as "a genuinely responsible public art" that, "in [Henri] Lefebvre's words, 'appropriate[s]' space from its domination by capitalist and state power" (xvi). Deutsche is particularly critical of art that can be easily taken to portray gentrification as the preservation of tradition, or that in some way promotes or inspires a "retreat from the social" (xvi) — in other words, art that aims "to transcend urban social conditions" (xvii). Emphasizing that aesthetics of whatever kind are always political, Deutsche directs her critique toward art that *pretends* to embody "ideals of aesthetic autonomy" (xvi). While I do not disagree with Deutsche's argument, I find that her concern with the potential social effects of such art ultimately leads her to declare a rather contained and somewhat joyless purpose for urban art.

Robertson, in her *Soft Architecture* essays, refuses to avoid elements of art that are perhaps more easily commodifiable — those that inspire pleasure or carry connotations of leisure or relief. Instead of ignoring fountains she riffs on possible interpretations of these civic ornaments, returning them to the domain of ethics and politics. For her, the surface textures of the city are "indexical euphorias" (15); she treats even utilitarian or maligned features of the city — such as scaffolding and blackberry vines — with a descriptive exuberance that attends to potential ideological content and that teaches readers to see these features with a joyful, but not uncritical, hope. In writing about an Arts and Crafts-style mansion in the Vancouver suburb of Burnaby, she offers a history

of the Arts and Crafts movement that remembers the style's origins in a radical politics, while charting its transformation into a privileged and moneyed "lifestyle" (97). As a poet-critic, Robertson "face[s] the reaching middle" between the material and the metaphysical, the political and the pleasurable (17), interlacing each of these in her "latticework for civic thought."

To summarize Robertson's reconceptualization of the urban poet-critic, it might be best to turn to her meditation on that sign of "perpetual renovation of Vancouver's leaky condominiums" — scaffolding (152). Scaffolding "wanders among solidities, a mobile currency that accretes and dissolves and shifts according to the secret rhythms of the city's renaissance and decay" (165). It plays a part in "diagramm[ing] change," as a web of bones sketching the shapes of buildings and as an instrument in restructuring and renovation (165). But scaffolding is also an open, dynamic, transitory system, and as such it functions as "the negative space of the building" that it sketches (165). Robertson assigns the scaffold — and the poet-critic — the task of making visible what the urban environment is, what it is not, and what it could be. The poet-critic, in Robertson's re-visioning, is not a mere pawn in a particular trajectory of restructuring in the city, nor is she a force of heroic opposition. Her role is generative, "add[ing] to our ideas new tropes, gestures learned from neighbours, . . . and the vigour of our own language in recombination" (184). In other words, she expands the possibilities of urban change.

Published together in a tiny book, written using the royal "we" as personal pronoun but in an "unevenly deluxe" style that "foregrounds its own overreaching" (Scappettone 74), Robertson's essays do work that is both "strong and weak," reinvigorating the role of the urban poet without fully redeeming it (17). But Robertson's repeated deflation of her project — as weak, as minor, as trivial, as "unheroic" (218) — is worth further consideration. It seems significant that she ultimately left Vancouver, and that in her introduction to the 2006 Coach House edition of the *Soft Architecture* collection (the essays were first published together by Clear Cut Press in 2003), she remarks, "When I try to go back, nothing happens" (1). Moreover, when reflecting on her Office for Soft Architecture years, Robertson suggests that in the process of watching and describing her city "dissolve in the fluid called money," she herself "became money" (1). Such a moment gestures evocatively toward

the compromised position of the city poet — that creator of paper-note descriptions — within larger processes of change, and implies the inevitability of being reduced to a sign of capital.

But if Robertson made a call to describe the city and then, ultimately, moved away from this urging, another Vancouver poet nevertheless responded to her call. Robertson's essays inspired long-time Vancouver resident and poet Meredith Quartermain in her own city-writing project: Quartermain has cited her fellow poet's *Soft Architecture* work in an interview, and she chose the Robertson quotation "Description is mystical. It's afterlife because it's life's reflection or reverse" as the epigraph for *Vancouver Walking*. Both poets are invested in the modernist tradition of urban peripatetic poetics; they treat words as "tool[s] of perception and . . . tool[s] of contemplation" (Pendleton-Jullian 493) and generate thick descriptions of urban experience with the aim of exploring the ethics of engaging in city life (Donald 170). However, the approaches of the two poets differ in notable ways. Robertson tends toward an often irreverently playful approach to urban description that allows her to produce creatively dissenting readings of city spaces. As I have suggested, this approach also functions to undermine her project — hers is, as she says, "a dissidence [that] slowly unspools" (1). Quartermain, on the other hand, generally refuses the ambivalence that emerges in Robertson's pieces and favours an intensely earnest approach — though her poems certainly do not lack humour or inventive wordplay. They do, however, attest to a sustained and serious purposefulness informed by the terms and necessities of everyday routine and by the particular parameters of her poetic practice.

A heightened interest in the lived experience of the poetic process was already clearly evident in Quartermain's earlier work. *A Thousand Mornings*, for instance, documents daily meditations that arose as she sat, each morning, at her window. Another collection, *Wanders*, comprises poems inspired by, and responding to, poems by fellow Vancouver writer Robin Blaser; these poems are the product, in other words, of an ongoing conversation. In preparing the first two sections of the *Vancouver Walking* collection (the third, "Coast Starlight," is devoted to a train trip through the western United States), Quartermain brought her interest in poetic process to the urban walk — specifically to her lived experience of particular walks in Vancouver. Most routes begin

from or return to her home community of Strathcona, one of the city's oldest neighbourhoods.[15]

A number of these walks were apparently conducted for mundane purposes — such as a trip to buy coffee beans, in the poem "Walk for beans," or to the library to borrow books, a walk described in "Backwards from Pender Lake." At the same time, these walks played a central role in a larger project, which Quartermain has described as a "6-month period of research and mapping expeditions in the City of Vancouver" ("Interview" n. pag.). In a public talk, she has explained that in preparing to write her walking poems she travelled each of her routes twice: the first time, she took notes on what she saw along the way; then, some time later, she walked the same route again, this time documenting the mental process of reflection arising in response to the perceived landscape — thoughts inspired by her diverse literary and historical interests, and often by her extensive reading and archival research on local history. In creating a poem about each route, she combined items from both sets of notes and used observations of street signs, architecture, trees and wildlife, trash, and people to anchor (like a foot touching pavement) her forays into meditation. Through this process, she created densely textured poems that register her experience of spaces encountered in her daily navigation of the city; the poems foreground her active, ongoing engagement with local history and with contemporary sociopolitical dimensions of life in Vancouver.

This sustained sense of purpose is a key element in Quartermain's reconceptualization of the role of the peripatetic urban poet. This figure, especially as it emerged in relation to *flânerie*, has commonly travelled through the city as a dreaming idler (to borrow Benjamin's phrase) — an ambling wanderer moving through spaces as a relative outsider transgressing social boundaries and, even in familiar spaces, retaining the distance of a voyeur. The concept of wandering has given foundational shape to countless urban art projects and experiments — perhaps most famously to the practice of *dérive* by Guy Debord and the Situationists, who set out to resist the dominant regimes of the city by drifting through its streets. One of Debord's biographers, Vincent Kaufmann, has described this project as "a form of pure and radicalized modernism, art reduced to [the] . . . principle of mobility" (115). Robertson, for her part, sustains this trope of wandering in her essays, declaring that she "drifts and plays and enunciates" (218). But

Quartermain, while still cultivating the combination of "spontaneous response" and "premeditated alertness" often associated with the practice of drifting (Donald 185), highlights a comparatively rooted relationship to place, and specifically to a home community, thus marking her practice as a significant divergence from the tradition of *flânerie* and other related forms of city walking.[16] By foregrounding the relationship of her poetic practice to her everyday routine in her home neighbourhood, she is able to emphasize that, though she is still inevitably an observer, even to an extent a voyeur, she is also fundamentally implicated in the community through which she walks.

Quartermain stresses this sense of implication by texturing her poetry with references to specific street and other place names. She describes her surroundings with a familiarity that can seem alienating to a reader with less local knowledge, mentioning offhandedly such sites and features as "the giant redwood at Maclean Park" (6), "the gulch where the working girls hang" (8), and "the place on Keefer that's always open" (59). This sense of an informed and particularized relationship to place is enhanced by her research into local history, which allows a briefly noted name to trigger a meditation on its political, social, and historical contexts or those of the site that it names. Many of Quartermain's walking poems consist of extended series of such meditations sparked by place names and other momentarily observed site features. For instance, in the opening to the poem "Thanksgiving," Quartermain very briefly notes her location on Gore Avenue, then offers a condensed, highly specific description of the location's early development history that comments on the appropriation of Aboriginal land and the effect of development on wildlife:

> Gore Avenue — track of an old skid
> Surveyor General of British Columbia
> ran from a True Lagoon
> to a place between first and second narrows
> the Spanish said people called Sasamat
> — no translation —
> teals, widgeons, shovelers, buffleheads,
> scoters, redheads, golden-eyes
> blue herons and the *Branta canadensis*
> lagooned at Ka wah usks — Two Points Opposite
> sawmills, sewage, shacktown
> till the railways paved it over. (3)

Such commentary is common in the poems, with Quartermain emphasizing the history of racist and patriarchal governance in her community and the impacts of industry and capitalist expansion on human and other forms of life. The commentary also tends to slip in and out of the present tense, as in "Walk for beans," which describes an ongoing neighbourhood tradition of small businesses making do:

> Victoria and Hastings
> gas station, public school, Owl Drugs & Post Office
> Sandwich Farm. Lattes.
> lunch counter tacked on the back of the building
> anything you can sell to keep going
>
> Lowertown 1920s
> Rosa Pryor started her Chicken Inn:
> *I couldn't afford to buy but 2 chickens at a time —*
> *I'd run my husband over there to buy the chicken*
> *he'd just cut them up right quick*
> *I'd wash them*
> *get them on frying*
> *I'd commence talking, "Oh, yes, yes, so and so and so,"*
> *talk to take up some time*
> *I'd see him come in, then I'd say*
> *"well, I must get those chickens on."*
> *I'd get him to pay*
> *Say to my husband "Now, you get 2 more."* (25-26)[17]

Another of the many instances of such slippage occurs in "Backwards from Pender Lake":

> walking past Pender Lake chain-link,
> abandoned trailers of white hard-hats
> Concord Pacific's International Village —
> land taken AGAIN from people —
> like Whoi-Whoi and Snauq from the Squamish
> for a song. (73)[18]

Here, Quartermain compares gentrification in her community to early colonial land grabs; a key aim in the poems is to contextualize recent urban development within what she perceives as a lengthy history of appropriation and oppression.

Thus, while Quartermain emphasizes the way that her poems emerge

in relation to the constraints of everyday routine in a home community, she also highlights the role of informed, contemplative, critical choice in determining what and how one sees and responds, foregrounding the reciprocal relation between perceiving subject and urban world. In so doing, she queries the idea of an autonomous public realm, and of the public realm as simply a built space — whether focussing on a park or a street or a square or a building. Instead, her poems demonstrate that "publicness happens" (Donald 182): it begins in and is sustained through dynamic interaction between subject and city, and must be consistently, carefully enacted by residents. Quartermain's play with the word "record" in her poem of the same name stresses this point. She questions the notion of the public record as a static, delimitable, and archivable entity; instead, she foregrounds her own practice recording (or describing) her urban world, a subjective practice embedded in everyday experience that involves reflection on her positioning and relation to others within the physical and social geographies of the city:

> **Record,**
>
> that I picked up the trash can from the lane
> and put it back in the garage.
> that there is a lane.
> that it runs between houses on squared plots of land.
> that garbage trucks empty trash cans — men driving — men
> picking up trash all day,
> 5 days out of 7 — their verve, their thoughts,
> their touch and smell, the universe
> of their eyes picking up trash
>
> so they can live on a rectangle in a house that's squared,
> and put out trash
> in their lanes. (66)

The poem continues with a series of similarly reflective "recordings" by an implicated, critical speaker, culminating with a final line which "records" "that the public world is here" — that publicness exists in those moments when the speaker sets herself in conscious relation to the city and its other residents (68).

In documenting this "interface" between subject and city, to borrow terminology from Elizabeth Grosz (108), Quartermain emphasizes its private as well as public dimensions. It *matters* that her poetry can

have an alienating effect on readers; the text functions as a trace of particular research done, of streets routinely walked, of an individual life lived, rather than serving as a mimetic representation or narrative of such facts. Quartermain thanks Ezra Pound, in her acknowledgements, for "blowing apart [her] syntax" (117), and her poetry alludes to his *Cantos*; indeed, throughout *Vancouver Walking* she tends to privilege what Hugh Kenner, commenting on Pound's poetry, describes as "constellated words" rather than "syntactic connections" (68). Her particular structuring of word-constellations allows her to suggest the movement and pace of her walk and thought, and she employs words and phrase fragments to index her lived experience of interaction with an urban community and its history, without allowing readers to feel at the centre of this experience. The endnotes appended to particular poems, which clarify historical, literary, and geographical references, enhance this feeling because they are incomplete. Certain notes are apparently included or omitted according to the author's whim; while some poems are heavily endnoted, others have few or no notes at all, despite the presence of references in the poem that likely leave many readers desiring further explication. Here again, the text indexes — rather than providing full access to — the work of the poet. From a reader's perspective, the poems attest to Quartermain's own otherness — a relation to the city that is always partially, inaccessibly private. Her poems exhibit her own engagement and demand the engagement of the reader; at the same time, they keep readers at a remove, cultivating the strangeness that is vital to city life and a necessary condition of pluralistic collectivity. In this sense, Quartermain diverges from two of the key modernist projects that inform her work — Pound's *Canto*s and that epic collection of textual fragments *The Arcades Project* — because while both of these projects attempt, however unsuccessfully, to encapsulate a city (in the case of Benjamin) and a world (in the case of Pound), Quartermain's work retains a smallness and privateness that acknowledges the limitations and particularity of her positioning.

Quartermain further emphasizes limitation and particularity by foregrounding bodily experience; for this reason, Grosz's term "interface" is especially apt because Grosz uses it to refer to the way that the body functions as a threshold between subject and world. She argues that the body is both self-produced and involuntarily marked from without; it is a "hinge" between the city (including other city dwellers) and the subject

(Grosz 109). Quartermain's attention to bodily experience is particular notable in "Backwards from Pender Lake," the poem that describes a trip home from the central branch of the Vancouver Public Library. Quartermain repeatedly mentions the "pounds of books" that she carries on her back, and the "too touristy" "yellow pack" that contains them (73). The books literally weigh her down; they seem to impact the pace of her walk and hint at imposed limits on her walking; while lugging books, she is not in a position to drift aimlessly or endlessly about the city. Certainly, both the books and the yellow pack function as symbols of social class, of cultural and at least a small degree of economic capital. Such symbolism is clear when Quartermain compares her own pack to the garbage bags carried by two "pickers," contemporary versions of Baudelaire's and Benjamin's ragpicker:

> The pickers or picketers, if only they could,
> walked beside me — skeletons in yard-sale pants,
> broken nylon zippers —
> green garbage bags of tins grubbed from trash bins.
> Beside my yellow pack with its buckled straps and books. (74)

But, in emphasizing the weight of the books ("how heavy the books" [75]), which she carries dutifully home on her back, Quartermain connects this social symbol to notions of burden and responsibility, implying that they play a role in her relative rootedness and sense of implication. In a late stanza, she suggests the books' role in informing her particular reading of the city:

> We crossed Georgia Street.
> The Strait George Vancouver called after the mad king.
> In my pack, three books by George Bowering. (75)

Here, with a playful rhyme, she connects a brief meditation on local history to Bowering's postcolonial literary treatments of early Vancouver, a selection of which are apparently packed in her bag.[19]

Both of the passages quoted in the preceding paragraph highlight Quartermain's complicated understanding of urbanity — of what it means to be together in city spaces. The mode of relationality that she explores in her poetry is informed at once by agonistic friction (heightened by her cultivation of her particularized point of view and awareness of her social positioning) and by a conscious turning toward — a

walking with — the other. In her statement that "The pickers or picketers, if only they could, / walked beside me," she insists on communal attachment, however brief, acknowledging both the desire for and the difficulty of solidarity (73). Later, walking toward Georgia Street, she observes

> a man and a woman in jackets and leather shoes.
> I wanta see all the Benzes, he said
> on familiar terms with them,
> like people who drive Beamers, not BMWs.
> We crossed Georgia Street. (74)

Without abandoning her investment in the critical articulation of social difference, Quartermain nevertheless also allows a sense of "we-ness" to emerge in proximity to others. Quartermain's agonistic *polis* is thus also a space of "'civil' [*concitoyenne*] coexistence," as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it (31), and demands the difficult ethical work of sharing specific spaces with various different strangers.

In *Vancouver Walking*, Quartermain reconceptualizes the peripatetic city poet and transforms the idle wanderer into dutiful community dweller. Like Robertson, she demonstrates a dedication to research that enables informed public engagement. However, she diverges from her fellow poet by foregrounding more rooted forms of perambulation, observation, and contemplation, producing poetry that testifies to a thoughtful, critical, implicated relation to a very particular urban space and community. Quartermain also seems inspired by Robertson's emphasis on the smallness of the poetic project; but, where Robertson combines grandiosity and self-deflation to suggest her complicated positioning as an urban poet-critic, Quartermain articulates this complexity through a project that, in its purposefully limited scope and mobility, its element of unassuming privateness, and its connection to the mundane routines of everyday living, lacks even a gritty or compromised sense of glamour. If Quartermain produces — and becomes a symbol of — cultural capital in and through her work as an urban poet, she also challenges reductively aestheticized perceptions of her role and lifestyle.

Robertson and Quartermain make important contributions to the conversation that characterizes the artist as a stimulus for urban redevelopment because they insistently query the terms that some scholars (and also actors in the property market) assign to the artist as symbol

of cultural capital. Ley, for instance, figures the artist as a decorator setting the stage for middle-class consumption in and of particular sites, however unintentional this set-dressing might be. Robertson and Quartermain do not deny their social positioning, but they aim to problematize and expand the limited range of connotations and meanings assigned to it, foregrounding those dimensions of the lived experience of a socially engaged city poet that often disappear in the discourse linking artists to urban restructuring. Both poets resist the reduction of the arts of urbanity to trend or "lifestyle"; instead, they encourage productive critical dialogue with a long tradition of urban description and artistic practice, and they advance the idea that cultivating a poetic mode of attention can help foster ethical relations and inform politicized forms of engagement in city spaces.

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Notes

[1] Though Robertson no longer lives in Vancouver (she now resides in Oakland, California), she was a long-term inhabitant of the city and developed her Office for Soft Architecture persona there.

[2] Throughout this article, I often refer to Robertson's *Soft Architecture* pieces simply as "essays" because that is how she herself describes them (*Soft* n. pag.). However, as I explain in my discussion of these pieces, they are also poetry. The *Soft Architecture* collection is, in effect, a collection of essay-poems.

[3] Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City*, situates Blake and Wordsworth at the beginning of the modern tradition of the poet as urban walker (233); however, Rebecca Solnit, who cites Williams in her history of walking, notes that London poets and walkers John Gay and Samuel Johnson were important precursors (180-81).

[4] The diversity of approaches to urban poetics that even this short list conjures — from the phenomenological poetics of place in many of Bowering's early poems (see, for example, those collected in Davey's *TISH* anthology) to Wayde Compton's exploration, in *Performance Bond*, of constructions of black culture in Vancouver (e.g., its commodification, its invisibility) — is important to emphasize. Daphne Marlatt is a particularly notable

predecessor to Robertson and Quartermain because she combines, in her writing, a dedication to historical research and an attentiveness to gendered experience in the city.

[5] In developing my thinking on urbanity in relation to the practices of Vancouver poets, I am indebted to Glenn Deer, who first brought a consideration of Kennedy's work to Vancouver writing (Deer 131-33).

[6] See recent studies by Thomas A. Hutton, David Ley, Kris Olds, and John Punter for critical discussion and assessment of Vancouver's late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century planning and development history. While these studies tend to focus on the redevelopment of the city's downtown core and False Creek neighbourhoods, Daniel Hiebert has recently noted that the extensive network of secondary (mostly rental) suites in primarily single-family-housing neighbourhoods across the city has encouraged a mixed socioeconomic demographic even in the most affluent districts, though rising rents certainly threaten such mixing.

[7] For example, the myYaletown website describes the formerly industrial district of Yaletown — the poster child of Vancouver's new residential downtown — as

> a trendy urban community comprising a mix of residential, office, restaurants, boutiques, cafes, and more. The elevated, brick-paved loading docks with their cantilever canopies now house sidewalk tables, providing shade and shelter for the patrons of the many dining and drinking establishments. . . . Originally Vancouver's garment district, Yaletown still retains its links through its fashionable boutiques and local designers. Now added to this mix are: high-end restaurants, microbreweries, high tech companies, home furnishings, galleries, BMW's Mini Cooper showroom, & hotel Opus [*sic*]: a contemporary boutique inn. ("The Rebirth of Vancouver's Yaletown")

[8] Ley analyzes empirical data from Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, focusing in particular on census tract data from Vancouver and Toronto.

[9] Commenting on the early presence of a literary non-profit in the now-gentrified Chicago neighbourhood of Wicker Park, Richard Lloyd observes that even makers of less commercially viable art such as poetry function as signs of cultural distinction and producers of cultural capital, "help[ing to] 'make the scene' . . . by providing local color," featuring the neighbourhood in their work, and contributing the "real brow sweat" that goes into putting on readings and running non-profit organizations or narrow-margin, arts-related businesses (102).

[10] See, for example, studies by Anne Friedberg, Anke Gleber, Mary Gluck, and John Rignall.

[11] I describe Robertson as a "poet-critic" rather than simply a "poet" because of the hybrid nature (part essay, part poetry) of her Soft Architecture work.

[12] A range of design, building, and economic factors converged to produce what is commonly referred to in Vancouver as "the leaky condo crisis," which began with the condominium-building boom in the 1970s and peaked in the 1990s. Poor or inappropriate construction left many homeowners facing costly repairs and decreased property values. Mandatory licensing, best-practices guides, a stronger warranty program, and greater vigilance on the part of consumers have all contributed to the abatement of the crisis (Boei B2), but the issue has not disappeared entirely. In June 2009, for example, the developers of the Olympic Village were subject to allegations that their buildings — the construction of which has been fast-tracked to ensure completion for the 2010 Winter Games — might prove susceptible to mould and mildew (Austin n. pag.).

[13] Robertson has noted that one of her reasons for writing under the persona of the Office was "to escape the author called 'Lisa Robertson'" (*PhillyTalks* 33) (see also Rudy 227n13).

[14] Spiegelman borrows this phrase from the poet Charles Tomlinson.

[15] Since publishing *Vancouver Walking*, Quartermain has continued her reflections on urban experience and poetic practice in the book *Nightmarker*.

[16] Interestingly, Quartermain seems to set herself apart from other recent manifestations of the female *flâneur* (or *flâneuse*); instead, she returns to and revises older forms. After all, as Robertson's work suggests, contemporary explorations of female *flânerie* tend to celebrate fluid, deterritorializing movement that transcends or undermines the city's dominant structures and processes. (For critical discussions of Canadian examples, see recent studies by Barbara Godard and Dominic Beneventi.) As Karin Schwerdtner and Karen Bamford note, such explorations of female mobility have proliferated as part of the critique of traditional "feminine models of stasis" constructed in relation to masculine models of mobility (7).

During the rise of the (typically male) *flâneur* in the nineteenth century, most women faced considerable restrictions to public perambulation. Generally, women walked in public only to shop, to engage in social or charity work, or — in the case of working-class women — to get to and from their place of employment; those who did transgress by walking more freely or for other purposes experienced greater marginalization as a result of their behaviour. (For examinations of the nineteenth-century female walker, see studies by Rachel Bowlby, Anne Friedberg, Mica Nava, Deborah L. Parsons, Griselda Pollock, Judith Walkowitz, Elizabeth Wilson, and Janet Wolff, among others.) Though she, of course, does not face the same restrictions as her nineteenth-century female counterparts, Quartermain returns to the notion of walking as a practice embedded in everyday routine and investigates both the possibilities and the limitations of this experience of rooted movement.

[17] As she acknowledges in a footnote, Quartermain is here quoting from Daphne Marlatt and Carole Itter's *Opening Doors: Vancouver's East End*, a collection of oral histories told by Strathcona residents.

[18] Whoi-Whoi was an Aboriginal settlement in the area of what is now known as Lumberman's Arch in Stanley Park (see Jean Barman's *Stanley Park's Secret*). Snauq was an Aboriginal settlement on False Creek. The Squamish still retain a small section of reserve land at the foot of the Burrard Street Bridge. In "Goodbye, Snauq," Lee Maracle tells of the appropriation of Snauq by European settlers, the history of Aboriginal land use in the area, and the impact of the loss of the settlement.

[19] Bowering himself engages in similar play with overlapping Georges of Vancouver in his work (e.g., *Burning Water* and *George, Vancouver: A Discovery Poem*). In her later book *Nightmarker*, Quartermain makes a clear nod to Bowering in the voice of "Geo," who in epistles scattered throughout the text signs off as "Geo, Vancouver."

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