

V6A: Writing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

John Mikhail Asfour and Elee Kraljii Gardiner, eds.

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Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

V6A: Writing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside is a collection of poetry and prose, a variety of voices, of beginner and established writers, all connected somehow to that region in Vancouver known as the Downtown Eastside (DTES). With its nexus at Hastings and Main (9), the DTES encompasses the old Chinatown and waterfronts east of Columbia Street. It has a reputation as "the poorest postal code in Canada," hence the title of the volume, *V6A*. Stereotyped as a place of derelict buildings, public drunkenness, drug usage, and visible sex trade, where traffic concerns trump human concerns, the DTES is one of the oldest neighbourhoods in this west-coast city, a place where many poorer immigrants and other migrants first establish themselves. In the long and somewhat meandering Introduction, the editors offer "a map, an experience of the community in this moment in time, as refracted in the imaginations of the writers" (13). Gary Geddes's Foreword establishes the tone and the theme. In his personal recollection of English Bay, being lost, police assistance, the streetcar driver's question sets the stage: "Where's home?" (vii) His DTES is a place where "dignity miraculously survives" (viii).

This sense of variety, of multi-culturalism, is evident in details peppering the stories and poems. People include children, trannies (pre-op, post-op), gay bashers, johns, dates, toughs, white trash, harlots, card sharks, suckers, binnars, the homeless, business men, and community leaders. They read Keats, Wordsworth, *Macbeth*, Charles Bukowski, Confucius, and *On the Road*. They eat kosher, falafel, cereal with raisins, sticky rice dumplings, dim sum, chicken ginseng soup, watermelon. They worry about poverty, pulling, hummers, pinned eyes, crack nirvana, Prozac, about saving face, and absolution.

In some pieces, readers can detect the prompt, the writing exercise, and in others, the spots where an editor's eye could have intervened. But most selections, especially the prose, are both entertaining and insightful. Madeleine Thien's narrative "The Fire Before" focuses on the personal, on family failure, disappointment, and divorce, and the belief that art is one escape route. "Through culture, my mother believed, we might break the cycle of our present lives" (28). Don Macdonald's "An Old Spook and His Coyote" delivers. As does Cathleen With's "Super Phat Angel Baby," about humanity among the sideshow "freaks." At Sen Yi's "Painter and Lover," I laughed out loud. It's a heartwarming story about a Chinese-Canadian art inquisition, with all the intergenerational conflict within a community "challenged" by differences: president and past-president, master and kung fu student, old guard and new immigrants. Members of the older generation with their past glory and outmoded information about the "old country" are pitted against new immigrants with post-cultural revolution and western values of art and life. The threat of a butch striptease results in a 911 call for an ambulance. But the narrator sees the connections. "People continue to search for something . . . The Taoists searched for it millennia ago" (84). In the city's sunshine and rain, in the artist's *yin qi* and *yang qi*, he sees holistic healing and sublimity (86).

I saved Wade Compton's "Seven Routes to Hogan's Alley: 2. A Home" for last. Hogan's Alley is Vancouver's equivalent to Africville, except that, instead of a garbage dump, Vancouver's "black" community was bulldozed to make way for an urban freeway which never materialized. As a result, Compton suggests, the community, which numbers 20,000 out of 2 million, is minimized and almost

invisible. So Black History Month provides an opportunity for a dispersed and integrated community to meet and celebrate a communal past. “We return, again and again, to the past to figure out our future. Recovering local black history is no different from the greater, global, diasporic urge. We seek to ease the anxiety of disruption and erasure.” (116) Hogan’s *Alley* is “something that grounds us in Canada” (118). “[We] are in the project of drawing a line from what was then to what is now” (119).

This book, *V6A*, like Hogan’s *Alley*, like the best of literature, grounds us in place. ♡

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