SENSES OF PLACE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE ENTRENCHED IN A “LOCAL” DRUG SCENE: AN URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY

by

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Abstract

In the public imagination, street youth are frequently defined through their relationships with place. Whether because they are viewed as innocent victims or violent criminals, young people who are homeless, destitute and visibly addicted to drugs are often understood to be out-of-place in the public spaces of city centers. This thesis is based on ethnographic fieldwork with a group of street-entrenched youth in Greater Vancouver conducted from January 2008 to January 2013. It included the creation of photography by youth exploring their sense of place in the city over time. Merging phenomenological perspectives on place-making with a focus on the processes of political economy and power that make some place worlds more enduring than others, I demonstrate that sense of place among youth who occupy the margins of urban space is far more complicated than conventional understandings imply. My findings reveal that, among youth, the “local” drug scene was produced in tension with a broader social spatial landscape of power, political economy and possibility, in which various remembered and imagined places were also implicated. In the context of this wider landscape-in-motion, involvement in Vancouver’s inner city drug scene could be articulated as both a sense of belonging and dislocation, “being in the center of something” and “getting lost in the city.” The drug scene could be a frontier of economic opportunity, in which anyone could attempt to stake a claim through activities like street-based drug dealing. And, it could be the site of a strictly
enforced moral logic of violence and organized crime. The overarching objective of this thesis is to characterize these complex understandings, experiences and affects, and how they intersected with the regimes of living youth enacted on the streets. I conclude by highlighting that in order to meaningfully address youth’s initiation into and sustained involvement in “risky” forms of drug use and crime in settings like Vancouver, intervention at the level of policy is urgently needed in order to address social suffering across young people’s lives, and the wider geographies they implicate.
Preface

The work presented in this thesis was conceived, instrumented, written and disseminated by the author, D. Fast. The fieldwork reported on in Chapters 4 to 6 was undertaken with ethical approval granted by the Providence Healthcare/University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board (H05-50186, H09-01644, H10-00838).

Chapter 4 is a revised version of Fast et al. (2013), “Did somebody say community? Young people’s critiques of conventional community narratives in the context of a local drug scene,” Human Organization 72 (2): 98-110. The co-authors of this manuscript (Jean Shoveller, Will Small, Thomas Kerr) made contributions only as was appropriate with committee or collegial duties. The co-authors reviewed the manuscript prior to submission for publication and offered critical evaluations. However, D. Fast was responsible for collecting and conducting analyses of the data, and preparing the initial draft of the manuscript. In addition, D. Fast was responsible for revising the manuscript based on the suggestions of the co-authors, submitting the manuscript for publication, and preparing final revisions based on the comments of the journal editors and external peer reviewers.

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Dedication

To the young people who gave me their stories

The teachers who gave me the words to write about them

And my parents, who gave me everything
Chapter 1

Introduction

Young people in- and out-of-place on the streets

In the public imagination, street youth are frequently defined through their relationships with place. Whether because they are viewed as innocent victims in need of protection from risk,¹ or violent criminals bent on destruction, young people who are homeless, destitute and visibly addicted² to drugs are often understood to be out-of-place in the public spaces of city centers (Caldeira 2000; Low 2000). At the same time, they may be understood to be in-place in neighbourhoods like Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, which has long been imagined as the proper destination of the urban poor and other “social deviants” in Vancouver – sometimes with sympathy, other times with disdain (Robertson 2007; Roe 2009/10).

¹ The language of risk, particularly in relation to youth, is loaded with assumptions regarding authorized and unauthorized health-related behaviors (Foucault 1995 [1977]; Shoveller and Johnson 2006; Hunt, Evans et al. 2007). Throughout this thesis, the term risk is therefore sometimes placed in parentheses, in order to indicate a critical orientation to these discourses ("as we like to think"), and to underscore instances where the definitions of “risk” imposed by various experts may have been incongruent with how young people themselves understood, experienced and scripted drug- and crime-related behaviors on the streets of Vancouver (Mayock 2005; Ong and Collier 2005).

² I use the phrase “visibly addicted” to emphasize the highly public experience of drug addiction in the context of homelessness and severe material deprivation in downtown Vancouver (Culhane 2003). Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside neighbourhood in particular is a zone of intense surveillance and monitoring, where people who use drugs “on the streets” are subject to the gaze of researchers, public health experts, politicians, activists, artists and the media (Foucault 1980).
Alternatively, these young people are understood to be highly transient and therefore *placeless* (Blomley 2004). Each of these understandings is reflected in efforts to address the street youth “problem” by relocating, removing or excluding homeless and street-entrenched youth from certain kinds of neighbourhoods and spaces, whether through aggressive policing or public health efforts to move young people indoors (Caldeira 2000; Connell 2003; Moore 2004; Sandberg and Pedersen 2008).

In this thesis, I will attempt to demonstrate that *sense of place* among those who occupy the margins of urban space is in fact far more complicated than any of these understandings imply (Feld and Basso 1996). I suggest that for youth who live, work, and use drugs “on the streets” of Vancouver, understandings and experiences of place, and of self, are multiple, in-process and stubbornly simultaneous (Soja 1989; Moore 1998; Raffles 1999; Gordillo 2004). Among the young people who were the subjects of this ethnographic research, involvement in Vancouver’s street-based drug scene could be articulated as a sense belonging and dislocation, “being in the center of something” and “getting lost in the city.” The drug scene could be a frontier of economic opportunity, in which anyone could attempt to stake a claim through activities like street-based drug dealing. And, it could be the site of a strictly enforced moral logic of violence and organized crime. The overarching objective of this thesis is to characterize these complex understandings, experiences and affects, and how they intersected with the *regimes of living* (Collier and Lakoff 2005) youth
enacted “on the streets” – a phrase that youth commonly employed to refer to both outdoor and indoor spaces associated with the local, street-based drug scene in Greater Vancouver.

**The youth**

This thesis is the result of ethnographic fieldwork conducted from January 2008 to January 2013, focused on a group of young people\(^3\) who were significantly entrenched in Vancouver’s inner city drug scene. Some referred to themselves as “street youth,” although most did not. In different moments, youth described themselves as out-of-control “drug addicts,” “clean” or in the process of “getting clean”; homeless, unstably housed or in the process of “getting a place”; doing crime, making money “the honest way,” or in the process of “going straight.” The youth who participated in this project were a diverse group who for the most part lived separate lives from one another. Where generalization was possible, it emerged as much from young people’s orientation to the cityscape as it did from social categorizations like gender and ethnicity (Robertson 2007; Miller 2008). Youth frequented many of the same service locations (e.g., street youth drop-in centers, public health clinics), and had likely used drugs in proximity to each other in the parks and alleyways of downtown Vancouver at one time or another. However,  

\(^3\) I use the terms “youth,” “young people,” and “local youth” interchangeably to refer to the individuals who participated in my research, as well as the wider, so-called street youth population in Vancouver. In using these terms in this way, I recognize that each of these social categories is complex, often ambiguous and continually (re)negotiated in particular times and places.
only a small number were networked in a more enduring sense, usually in the form of a romantic or crime-related partnership.

Yet, these young people were part of an urban population for whom overlapping historical, social structural and interpersonal forces have rendered everyday living “problematic” in similar ways (Collier and Lakoff 2005). Among this population, social suffering (Kleinman, Das et al. 1997) often takes the form of homelessness and blood-borne infections; mental illnesses, overdoses and hospitalizations; and the chronicity of relapse and “recovery” (Roy 2003; Miller, Spittal et al. 2005; Rachlis 2008; Werb 2008; Marshall, Kerr et al. 2009; Garcia 2010; Hadland, Marshall et al. 2011). It takes the form of physical violence as a result of volatile drug deals and romantic relationships; haunting childhoods and seemingly inevitable futures; social exclusion and poverty (MacDonald and Marsh 2002; Bourgois, Prince et al. 2004; Stoltz, Shannon et al. 2007; Werb 2008; Bengtsson 2012; German and Latkin 2012). Social suffering is reflected in ascribed and adopted labels like “junkie” or “crackhead,” “drunken Indian” or “white trash,” as well as other seemingly more innocuous labels like “street youth,” “IDU [injection drug user],” “no fixed address,” “hard to house” and “client” (Gurstein and Small 2005; Wood 2007; Radcliffe and Stevens 2008; Roe 2009/10). Among this population, social suffering is engendered by the structural violence (Farmer 1997) of historical and institutional forces ranging from the history of colonialism in Canada (one third of
the young people who participated in this research were of Aboriginal ancestry), to growing inequities in Canadian society, to the “war on drugs” (Harris 2002; Wood, Werb et al. 2010; BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition 2012). It is produced by the everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes 1992) of routinized harms and brutalities on the streets. And it is generated by the symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1997) that legitimizes feeling “stuck” in a place like the Downtown Eastside as “just the way things are” for certain “kinds” of people. Among this population, social suffering – the assemblage of human problems that have their origins in the devastating injuries that various social and economic forces can inflict on human experience (Kleinman, Das et al. 1997) – is often embodied as the natural order of things.

The young people whose words appear on these pages are not representative of all youth who use or have used drugs on the streets of Vancouver. The youth I came to know were among the most socially excluded and economically marginalized. In most cases, these experiences extended back into their childhoods. For example, of the 71 individuals with whom I conducted formal, in-depth interviews, only two had never experienced homelessness (e.g., sleeping outside, “couch surfing,” staying at shelters). The majority grew up in low-income, materially disadvantaged households and approximately two-thirds had experienced violence and abuse early in life. Roughly half had a history of government care in group and foster homes, whether in British Columbia or another

4 Ethnicity was self-identified by participants.
Canadian province (only a handful of the young people who participated in this research were born outside of Canada). Of these youth, some had “aged out” of government care prior to becoming street-entrenched (this occurs at age 19 in British Columbia). Others had left care early to become emancipated minors and subsequently found themselves without a place to live (youth who exit care early in British Columbia have been shown to be markedly more likely to become a part of the homeless population; Serge, Eberle et al. 2002). None of the youth who participated in this research had been able to return to a stable family home after leaving government care.

Approximately half of young people had a history of involvement in the juvenile justice system and/or had served time in an adult prison. Only 15 of 71 had graduated from high school or later completed their General Education Diploma (GED) – sometimes while in prison. Roughly three quarters of youth received monthly social assistance payments. Given the grossly inadequate amounts of welfare in the province of British Columbia, youth who did not already receive “Disability 2” social assistance were desperately trying to get onto it, which required an “official” diagnosis like schizophrenia. Disability therefore became a solution as well as a cause of homelessness and material deprivation for some youth (Gowan 2000). Approximately two-fifths of the young people who participated in

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5 In British Columbia, youth who receive Disability 2 assistance are entitled to approximately three hundred dollars more per month than those who receive regular assistance (CAD$906.42 per month as opposed to CAD$610). Youth who receive disability assistance are also eligible for modest health and crisis income supplements.
this research indicated that they were living with a professionally or self-diagnosed mental illness.

Most youth were involved in a range of licit and illicit income generation activities simultaneously. Notably, around three quarters engaged in street-level drug dealing at some point during the study period. Youth also engaged in theft (ranging from shoplifting to armed robbery), and the exchange of stolen and purchased “merch” (merchandise). Fourteen young people explicitly engaged in sex work; a much larger number exchanged sex and romantic companionship for drugs, food, shelter and spending money without labeling this as sex work. Most youth had panhandled in the city at one time or another; for a small number this was their primary means of accruing income. An even smaller number engaged in recycling activities (referred to as “binning”), and a handful made money by street performing. Income was supplemented by participation in a local street youth job action program that provides temporary work (e.g., graffiti removal, garbage collection) for same day pay, as well as by participation in research studies aimed at street youth and drug users.

At some point over the five year study period, all youth were engaged in drug use practices that they defined as “out-of-control” and/or “self-destructive”; that is, daily drug use which was resulting in physical, psychological and emotional damage, whether directly as a result of the chemical properties of a particular
substance, or indirectly as a result of the violence and instability that can accompany drug addiction in the context of severe material deprivation. Over half of the youth who participated in this research had used heroin; over three quarters had used crystal methamphetamine and/or crack cocaine. Youth commonly engaged in poly-substance use, and half had engaged in injection drug use. Most youth also smoked marijuana and drank alcohol, and a small number indicated that they struggled with alcoholism. At any one time, a handful of young people indicated that they were “getting clean” (i.e., they had not used drugs intensively or at all for a period of time they deemed significant). Particularly towards the end of the study period, a number of youth expressed an intention to “pull themselves together” (this usually referred to a combination of getting clean and/or sober, getting a place, getting a job and getting out of downtown Vancouver), with the goal of eventually exiting “the scene” altogether.

The Vancouver drug scene

Drug scenes can be most basically described as inner city areas characterized by high concentrations of drug users and drug dealing (Curtis and Wendel 2000; Hough and Natarajan 2000). They can be categorized on the basis of whether they are “open” or “closed” (May and Hough 2001). Open drug scenes tend to be visible public settings where few barriers to access exist, and individuals unknown to dealers are able to purchase drugs. Conversely, closed drug scenes function in more
hidden locations, where individuals seeking drugs must know or be introduced to a dealer. Drug scenes vary considerably according to a number of other factors, including the types of drugs available, who controls the sale of illicit substances, the specific locales in which drugs are sold and used, as well as the history of particular drug use settings (Bourgois 1996; Maher 1997; Curtis and Wendel 2000). Beyond drug procurement and dealing activities, elaborate social spatial networks, practices associated with the day-to-day realities of securing basic necessities, and wider patterns of income generation activities are also embedded in these locales. Drug scenes are historical, cultural, social and spatial zones in which diverse people interact and continually negotiate and renegotiate the meanings of their actions. As I will describe below, they are characterized by experiences of fluidity and fragmentation, as well as permanence and immovability (Moore 2004; Fast, Shoveller et al. 2009).

In Vancouver, the inner city drug scene is most often identified with two downtown neighbourhoods (collectively referred to by many youth as simply “down here”). In particular, Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside neighbourhood has received significant media and academic attention for its reputation as Canada’s poorest urban postal code, and the site one of the worst HIV epidemics in North America (Wood and Kerr 2006). On the corner of Main and Hastings Street in the heart of the Downtown Eastside, the open drug market operates 24/7. Veteran street-level dealers sell crack cocaine, heroin and prescription opiates while others
try to make a few bucks by selling their methadone. Those who are buying dart furtively into nearby alleyways to use. Some smoke crack and do their fix (injection) in plain view of passing cars and pedestrians. The Downtown Eastside is also inhabited by a large number of people who do not use drugs at all – they are simply poor. For example, on Pender Street just one block south of Hastings, you can see elderly Asian men and women walking slowly along Chinatown’s streets, grocery shopping, socializing, and occasionally digging through public garbage bins for discarded cans and bottles. These can be returned for a small refund at the Bottle Depot further down on Hastings Street, another place where the buying and selling of drugs and boosted merch – ranging from shoplifted health care products to iPhones to whole frozen turkeys – continues unabated at all hours of the day and night.

The Downtown South is within easy walking distance of the Downtown Eastside (Figure 1), and also the site of a thriving drug market. It is a popular destination for young people who use drugs on the streets. During my fieldwork, the Downtown South was the place in downtown Vancouver to buy and sell crystal methamphetamine, which was the drug of choice among approximately half of the youth who participated in this research (Wood 2008; Werb, Kerr et al. 2010). Heroin and crack cocaine use are also commonplace in the neighbourhood. However, in contrast to the Downtown Eastside, in the Downtown South youth proudly upheld (and sometimes violently enforced) the fact that drug dealing and use takes place
largely out of sight – behind closed doors, in alleyways and underneath bridges. In the neighbourhood, shopping malls, glitzy nightclubs and recently developed high-end apartment complexes rub shoulders with a handful of single room occupancy hotels, shelters and street youth drop-in centers, further disguising the marginality that exists there. The Downtown South is adjacent to Vancouver’s West End neighbourhood (Figure 1), which extends down to Vancouver’s popular tourist beaches on the western edge of the downtown core, and across to the large forested area of Stanley Park and the surrounding Seawall in the northwest corner of the city center – another of Vancouver’s most popular attractions for locals and foreigners alike.

Urban poverty and homelessness are nevertheless visible in both the Downtown South and West End neighbourhoods. In the West End, groups of homeless youth panhandle along Davie Street, in front of gay bars and ethnic restaurants that draw patrons to the neighbourhood from all over the city. On Granville Street in the Downtown South, they sit in front of the string of nightclubs and trendy clothing stores that are increasingly taking over the north end of the block, displaying jiffy markered cardboard signs that ask for donations of spare change and food. At night, you can see youth sleeping in the entryways and alcoves

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*Single room occupancy hotels (SROs) are multiple-tenant buildings that house one or two people in individual rooms (typically three meters by three meters in size in the Vancouver setting). Tenants usually share bathrooms and kitchens. SROs are former hotels, but are primarily rented as permanent, low-income residences (for around CAD$375 per month in Vancouver). Rent is commonly deducted directly from monthly social assistance payments (leaving those who receive regular social assistance with CAD$235 to live on per month).*
of these same establishments, with blankets and sleeping bags pulled up over their heads and disposable paper coffee cups placed close beside them, in the hopes that someone might donate change on their way home from a late night out. Mostly they are ignored, or picked up by police and transported to the nearest available shelter bed. The Downtown Eastside in particular has been subjected to intensive enforcement initiatives in recent years (Small, Kerr et al. 2006), although police activities are also ongoing in the Downtown South.

In both the Downtown South and the Downtown Eastside, shadow economies propelled by sex work activities, drug dealing and the exchange of stolen goods often require youth to move in and out of the downtown core via the SkyTrain – a public transportation system that was originally built for, and as an attraction of, Vancouver’s Expo ’86 World Fair (Figure 2). The SkyTrain functions as a main artery of the Greater Vancouver drug scene, carrying youth back and forth – sometimes several times a day – between various nodes of activity. These include the bustling transportation hub at Broadway and Commercial Street in East Vancouver, where youth congregate to socialize, drink coffee and deal drugs; the crack shacks scattered throughout the suburbs of Surrey, Port Coquitlam, New Westminster and Burnaby; and shoplifting hot spots like Metrotown Mall and Coquitlam Shopping

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7 Crack shacks are houses in which drugs are sold and consumed. They are generally run down, and vary significantly depending on how open or closed they are to newcomer customers. While some have the feel of an all-day house party that you can stay at as long as you have the money to keep buying, others are only accessible to those with the right “connections.”
Centre. While young people often described a feeling of being “trapped” in downtown Vancouver as a result of addictions, material deprivation and homelessness, the lives I was studying were inherently translocal (Gigengack and Van Gelder 2000; Moyer 2003). Whether to pursue work or leisure, rest or play, young people’s movements through the city often created elaborate and expansive geographies (Figure 3).

Outline of the thesis

This thesis examines and characterizes how a group of young people understood, experienced and engaged with an inner city drug scene during the course of approximately 5 years of ethnographic fieldwork in Greater Vancouver. In Chapter 2, I describe the theoretical positioning of this project, followed by a description of my methods in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I draw on my empirical findings to critically explore assumptions about a “community” of drug-using youth, which can be neatly mapped onto geographically-bounded inner city neighbourhoods like Vancouver’s Downtown South and Downtown Eastside. I use young people’s complex understandings, experiences and critiques of community on the streets as a way to both delimit and unmake some of the boundaries of my “study setting” and “study population.” I illustrate how the language of community could obscure the multiple and contradictory ways in which young people envisioned and attempted to enact belonging in the city, setting the stage for my
discussions in Chapters 5 to 7. In Chapter 5, I describe the complex and shifting terrains of power, political economy and possibility that young people engaged with as they attempted to make a place for themselves in Vancouver, and negotiate forms of belonging and becoming in the city beyond membership in a drug user or street youth community. I explore youth’s sense of place on the streets over time in relation to broader landscapes-in-motion, which included remembered and imagined places like hometowns and the Rez, college campuses and “white picket fence” homes, and implicated various relocations and dislocations across time. There, I more explicitly draw out the contradictions that actively produced the “local” drug scene in Vancouver, as well as young people’s place in it. I argue that these contradictions reflect larger geographies of exclusion, as well as young people’s desires for things to be otherwise in the city. In Chapter 6, I focus on how power, political economy and desire intersected with intensive involvement in street-level drug dealing and low level, gang-related crime, to shape young people’s place worlds in particularly enduring ways. I highlight that youth’s involvement in these income generation activities cannot be understood independently of the forces of structural, symbolic and everyday violence that constrained the possibilities of place

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8 In Canada, a reserve (often referred to by youth as simply “the Rez”) is a tract of land set aside under the Indian Act and treaty agreements for the use of a Native band. Band members have the right to live on reserve, although they do not strictly own reserve lands. This land continues to be held in trust by the Crown and subject to various permissions and inhibitions (Harris 2002). Reserves therefore arguably continue to function as colonial spaces, and powerfully shape the opportunities and movements of Native people – including to places like the Downtown Eastside (Blomley 2004; Jervis, Spicer et al. 2003; Harris 2002). In Canada, the ongoing effects of nationwide colonial disposessions, including endemic poverty and a lack of opportunities on reserves, compel the relocation of many Native young people to the city (Blomley 2004).
for young people across their lives, but nor can they be reduced to these materialist
analytics. In Chapter 6, I illustrate that a consideration of the material and moral
economies of drug dealing and gang-related crime is essential to understanding
young people’s initiation into, and sustained involvement in, these “risky” regimes
of living. In Chapter 7, I discuss the implications of this project for research, policy
and practice.
Figure 1 Map of Downtown Vancouver

Figure 2 Map of the SkyTrain Station
Figure 3 Map of Greater Vancouver
Chapter 2

Power, Political Economy and Possibility in the Margins

Theorizing places like an inner city drug scene

In this thesis, I aim to complicate how we think about places like a “local,” inner city drug scene, as well as the young people who inhabit them (Raffles 1999; Moore 2004; Singer 2006). To do so, I merge phenomenological perspectives on place-making and the meanings of place with a focus on the processes of political economy and power that make some place worlds more enduring than others. This allows me to situate young people’s sense of place – the ordinary ways in which they engage their surroundings and find them significant (Basso 1996; Feld and Basso 1996) – within a particular historical moment. This was a moment marked by events like the 2008 global economic recession and the 2009 Vancouver gang war, the 2010 Winter Olympic Games and the 2011 global Occupy movement. During my fieldwork, the gentrification of neighbourhoods like the Downtown Eastside accelerated rapidly in Vancouver. On the streets, rumors circulated that Hastings Street’s most notorious real estate, to the east and west of the Main Street intersection, was worth millions and would be soon sold off to condominium
developers. The “problem streets” of the Downtown Eastside – where a speed limit of 30 km/hour was introduced in 2011 to prevent collisions with pedestrians who, for various reasons, are oblivious to oncoming traffic – are now edged to the east and west by two of Vancouver’s most desirable neighbourhoods. Just a few blocks east, a number of my university friends own houses in Strathcona, one of the last neighbourhoods in central Vancouver where it is possible to do so without being wealthy. To the west, Gastown’s historical buildings have been converted into exposed brick office spaces and lofts, restaurants and high-end furniture shops. Increasingly, even in the heart of the Downtown Eastside, the aesthetic of yuppie cafés, new condos and expensive restaurants mixes with the down-and-out appearance of SROs and well-worn storefronts and bars, creating a sort of poverty chic.

Places – and in particular cities – are increasingly fractured by socioeconomic hierarchies (Caldeira 2000; Low 2000; Sassen 2007). The new cafés and condos cropping up in the Downtown Eastside (and in other areas of the city) are not inclusive of the young people who participated in this project – at least not in the ways they desired. Youth may have been permitted to wash dishes and clean the floors of these establishments, or to clear debris from construction sites while they were being built, but they were not able to engage with these spaces as paying customers, renters or homeowners. Simultaneously, however, the Downtown Eastside has become the site of a large social service infrastructure, offering housing.
food, health care, harm reduction, advocacy and religious salvation to vulnerable populations (Roe 2009/10). In the wake of an officially-declared public health emergency in the Downtown Eastside in the mid-1990s, and more generalized calls to address the highly visible social ills “plaguing” the neighbourhood, the Vancouver Agreement was signed by the City of Vancouver, the Government of British Columbia, and the Government of Canada in 2000 (Vancouver Agreement 2010; Murray 2011). This agreement (which was renewed in 2005, and expired in 2010) identified homelessness, addictions, disease and hunger as urgent policy matters to be better managed and controlled through local partnerships between government, businesses and community organizations (Murray 2011). The expanded social service infrastructure that emerged out of this agreement has supported two heroin maintenance trials and, notably, North America’s first supervised injection facility (known as Insite), which is located a few storefronts down from the Main and Hastings intersection (Oviedo-Joekes, Nosyk et al. 2009; Small 2012). Over the course of my fieldwork, Insite was the subject of much public and academic debate and numerous legal proceedings at the provincial and federal levels, culminating in a 2011 Supreme Court of Canada ruling in favor of keeping the facility open (Small

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9 The NAOMI project (North American Opiate Medication Initiative) operated from 2005 to 2008 in the Downtown Eastside. Enrolled participants had to be over 25 years of age and living in the Downtown Eastside, have been using opiates for at least 5 years, and not on probation or facing criminal charges. Participants were randomly assigned to treatments of oral methadone or injected heroin. A small subset of participants received injectable hydromorphone (Dilaudid) instead of heroin. The SALOME study (Study to Assess Longer-term Opioid Medication Effectiveness) began in 2011, and is aimed at further exploring the benefits of hydromorphone as a substitute for heroin.
Most of the youth who participated in this study were highly attuned to these events as they unfolded (and many were directly involved in the advocacy and research that surrounded these events). For some, the court victory represented an explicit acknowledgement of their right to the city, and to sheer life (Lefebvre 1968; Collier and Lakoff 2005; Harvey 2008). Others were more ambivalent about Insite, for reasons I will explore in the chapters that follow.

As ideologies of class and pathology are actively incorporated into the urban landscape, the politics of place position different “kinds” of young people in relation to one another in ways that are both obvious and obscure. The reorganization of space – into gentrified apartment complexes and cafés, safer injecting sites and refurbished SROs – brings into focus the very different horizons of possibility that are available to young people in the city (Blomley 2004; Malins, Fitzgerald et al. 2006; Rhodes, Watts et al. 2007). In this thesis, I explore how young people’s sense of place in the city over time – their sense of where they did and did not belong – could become the terrain through which dominant representations of class and pathology organized consent by becoming embodied (Richardson 1982; Feld and Basso 1996; Mehta and Bondi 1999). The mutually constitutive process between place as it is experienced, perceived, remembered and imagined, and the habitus – the system of acquired dispositions and classificatory principals for action experienced at the level of the body as “common sense” – can render the spatialization of everyday life a part of the natural order of things, and conceal the work of power and political

Power and political economy do not determine place and spatial practice absolutely, however (Soja 1989). In this thesis, I demonstrate that any totalizing vision can never capture all of the meanings, significations and practices that continually produce places like Vancouver’s inner city drug scene (Ruddick 1996; Stewart 1996; Riaño-Alcalá 2002). Places are always in motion, always in process (Massey 1994; Raffles 1999; Gordillo 2004). They are continually evolving and becoming, being made and unmade, contested and settled, territorialized and de-territorialized through the practice of everyday life (De Certeau 1984; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). As I will show, among the youth who participated in this research, gentrification and events like the 2010 Olympic Games could be sites of exclusion, but they were also sites of desire for alternative horizons of possibility, belonging and becoming in the city (Deleuze 1995). Young people’s sense of place in Vancouver reflected both fixity and a passion for the possible that, in certain moments, had the potential to break open alternative pathways or “lines of flight” in everyday lived experience (Deleuze 2006; Biehl and Locke 2010).
Theorizing suffering and desire on the streets

High rates of addiction, interpersonal violence and blood borne infections among youth living and working in the margins of urban space are often viewed through the lens of individualistic, psychological theories about “root causes,” ranging from childhood trauma to low self-esteem to “thrill seeking” (Shoveller and Johnson 2006; Campbell 2007; Boyd 2008; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Milhet, Moloney et al. 2011). Following others, in this thesis I use the concept of social suffering to argue that any understanding of drug use, violence and infection in places like Vancouver’s inner city drug scene must engage a historical, social, political economic and moral nexus (Kleinman, Das et al. 1997; Lather and Smithies 1997; Maher 1997; Friedman and Alicea 2001; Woolford 2001; Hunt, Milhet et al. 2011). Building on previous work, I direct our attention to their phenomenology and political economy, their intimate and institutional forms.

A well established body of work has demonstrated how a rethinking and redefining of violence as something more than directly assaultive physical phenomena can help us to link intimate experiences of suffering to larger processes of political economy and power (Schepers-Hughes and Bourgois 2003). Violence can be understood to operate along a continuum that spans structural, symbolic, everyday and intimate dimensions. Structural violence refers to how the inequitable organization of society wrecks havoc on categories of people at the bottom of socioeconomic hierarchies (Farmer 2003). Everyday violence calls attention to the
social production of indifference in the face of institutionalized harms (Schepers-Hughes 1996), and can be extended to refer to the ways in which violence is routinized and made ordinary through commonplace interpersonal interactions (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). The concept of *symbolic violence* was developed by Bourdieu (1977; 1997) to more fully explicate how socioeconomic hierarchies are maintained and *legitimized* through everyday practices in particular places. Central to symbolic violence is the concept of *habitus*. Habitus is the incorporation of the social into the body (Vitellone 2004). It refers to our deepest likes, dislikes and personal dispositions, including those of our preconscious bodies, and shapes ways of being at the most intimate level (e.g., the physical postures that young people adopt while using drugs on the streets of the Downtown South; Bourgois and Schonberg 2007). Our habitus is grounded historically in the frameworks of society and reflects hidden forms of symbolic power, but is frequently misrecognized as individual “character” or “common sense.” Symbolic violence refers to the mechanisms that lead those who are marginalized to “misrecognize” their lived realities as the natural order of things, or as “just the way things are” for particular “kinds” of people in particular “kinds” of places.

In this thesis, I describe how out-of-control and self-destructive addictions, as well as other forms of everyday violence on the streets of Vancouver, were usually attributed to the bad choices exhibited by the urban poor – including by many of the young people who participated in this project. The larger forces of political economy...
that are in fact at work in producing and re-producing “risk” and harm in this setting often operate invisibly, through the schemes of perception, thought and action that are constitutive of the habitus. In echoing these previous arguments, however, I also recognize that neo-Marxist analytics like symbolic, structural and everyday violence can miss the anxious uncertainty and open-endedness that characterizes lived experience, as well as more subtle and dispersed processes of power (Foucault 1980 [1972]; Jackson 1996; Biehl and Locke 2010). They provide only a partial picture of how the youth who participated in this research understood, experienced and engaged with the politics of place in Vancouver over time.

The practice of everyday life on the streets did not simply reflect experience as it had been constituted for young people (Biehl and Locke 2010). Rather, their collective and individual struggles to “carve out life chances from things too big, strong and suffocating” reflected a desire towards becoming that departed from that experience (Deleuze 1997:3; Biehl 2005). On the streets, young people were attempting to shake loose from determinants and definitions – determinants and definitions like “crackhead” and “junkie,” but also “street youth” and “homeless.” In certain moments, their desires for things to be otherwise could crack through apparently rigid social formations and fields, and open up new subject positions (Biehl, Good et al. 2007). Thus, in this thesis I simultaneously try to move beyond materialist analytics, to convey some of the “messiness” bound up in youth’s negotiations of place, possibility, belonging and becoming in the city over time.
Following Deleuze, I attempt to map young people’s “flights” and escapes, as well as moments when their passages were blocked (Deleuze 1997; Deleuze 2006; Biehl and Locke 2010).

Theorizing youth populations in the margins

Beginning as early as the 1950s, sociocultural approaches to the study of drug use have explored the existence of shared cultural mores and social practices – which were later often referred to as “drug user subcultures” – among groups of young people who use drugs in inner city settings (Becker 1953). The rise of poststructuralism heralded a critique of anthropology’s tidy modes of classification, and the idea that the geographically-bounded and timeless “(sub)cultures,” “communities” and “societies” described in anthropological writing mirrored an existing reality in the field (Said 1978; Clifford and Marcus 1986). As anthropologists attempted to move away from the functionalist impulse to impose “order” on our research subjects and sites, we became increasingly interested in the complexities, inconsistencies and contradictions involved in the negotiation of lived experience within and across particular times and places (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). And yet, the language of community and (sub)culture continue to be ubiquitous in academic, public health and policy discourse about drug-using and street youth populations (Moore 2004; Singer 2006). While the two terms are not synonymous, the problems inherent in theorizing a monolithic drug user or street youth subculture are similar to
those of theorizing a monolithic drug user or street youth community. Both may fail to recognize the fluidity and fragmentation that characterize cultural meanings, social relationships and identities on the streets (Hannerz 1992; Waterson 1993; Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003; Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004).

In what follows, I critically examine and ultimately move away from the language of community, (sub)culture and singular identities, and towards a focus on regimes of living and the multiple subjectivities these generate (Collier and Lakoff 2005; Biehl, Good et al. 2007). On the streets of Vancouver, young people did not appear to be linked so much by a common street youth subculture or identity, or by membership in the same community, but by shared regimes of living. These are tentative and situated configurations of practices and practical knowledges, relationships and habits of relating, as well as technologies of administration (e.g., harm reduction) and political elements (e.g., the war on drugs), which are brought into alignment in situations where the question of how to live is at stake (Collier and Lakoff 2005). These configurations engender particular values, moral logics and subjectivities – such as the “responsible” drug user who goes to Insite, the politicized “street youth” who protests the Olympics, or the hustler who uses the lucrative price point of illicit drugs on the streets in order to “get ahead” in the city (Bourgois 2000; Friedman and Alicea 2001; Roitman 2005; Moore and Fraser 2006; Moore 2008). The young people who participated in this project enacted multiple regimes of living simultaneously, which were continually reworked, reshaped and
improvised in response to the shifting exigencies of particular situations (Collier and Lakoff 2005; Hallam and Ingold 2007). Their subjectivities were similarly unfinished and unfinishable, multiple rather than unitary, and externally constituted rather than inner essences (while at the same time being an effect of power; Foucault 1980 [1972]; Biehl, Good et al. 2007).

As I will show, things like the war on drugs and the gentrification of the Downtown Eastside presented themselves in young people’s lives as very real and overwhelming forces of exclusion. But they could also be reworked into novel regimes of living and personal trajectories that, in different moments, reflected affective states of hope and hopelessness, capability and inefficacy, excitement and boredom (Biehl, Good et al. 2007). From this perspective, power played out in young people’s lives through the institutions and technologies of administration that limited their freedom – through the aggressive policing of public “disorder” and imprisonment, welfare cheque line-ups and heroin maintenance trials (Bourgois 2000; Friedman and Alicea 2001). But power also played out through the micro-practices and moral logics bound up in the various regimes of living youth enacted out of the social service infrastructure, the lucrative price point of illicit drugs on the streets, and the inevitability of imprisonment. Following Foucault (1980 [1972]; 1995 [1977]), power was productive and embedded in the practice of everyday life.
As an analytic, Collier and Lakoff’s notion of regimes of living intersects with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. The biographical and historical sediments that constitute the habitus are bound up in the configurations of practices, practical knowledges and habits of relating that are brought into alignment to produce particular regimes of living. However, regimes of living can also incorporate various technologies of administration, political elements and global imaginaries, resulting in new common sense understandings of the world that may diverge significantly from past experience. Combining Bourdieu’s notion of habitus with Collier and Lakoff’s notion of regimes of living allows me to position young people’s actions as both predetermined and contingent, caught in a limited universe of choices that remained the only source from which they could improvise alternative moral logics, value systems and understandings of “the good” (Petryna 2002; Lahire 2003; Biehl 2005; Garcia 2010).

It has been suggested that the anxieties and uncertainties bound up in the present moment of free market capitalism – vast socioeconomic inequities and the perceived gap between the real and the ideal, for example – find their most forceful expression in the contemporary predicament of young people, whether they are living in Dar es Salaam or Vancouver (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Sassen 2007). Of course, too-easy analyses of neoliberalism and capitalism can obscure shifting and multiple realities on the ground (Gibson-Graham 2004; Tsing 2005). These are moving forces that are immanent in scenes,
subjects and places (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Stewart 2007). Their actual shape and significance for forms of individual and collective life can only be understood as they enter into novel relationships and assemblages with other elements “on the ground” (Ong and Collier 2005). However, the world over, young people who find themselves on the losing end of these global processes increasingly seem to exist in “local” worlds that engender an uneasy mix of enfranchisement and marginalization, resulting in new regimes of living around what it means to be a “teenager,” “youth,” and “young adult” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Sassen 2007).

Generation is simultaneously a chronological and social category, that often closely aligns with notions of progress (Cole 2004; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Mains 2007). In the present moment, however, the modernist dream of inevitable advancement has been thrown into crisis – it is no longer a given that each generation does better than its predecessor (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005). In Vancouver and elsewhere, as blue collar industries and union wage jobs-for-life have mutated or been relocated, youth without formal education and training increasingly find themselves excluded from the urban economy (Sassen 2007). Largely disconnected from the flows of capital accumulated in schools and through helpful investments from family members, the youth who participated in this research are arguably a part of a growing “flexible” work force who must find ways to “get by” in the social, spatial and economic margins (Harvey 1990; Gowan 2000).
And yet, the rise of global imaginaries of consumption that are decidedly tied to generation – such as those reflected in popular music, films and advertising campaigns, and that move around the world at lightening speed via online media forums – have generated shared material expectations detached from previous experiences (such as the experience of growing up poor; Koselleck 1985 [1979]; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Sassen 2007). Across diverse settings, neoliberal capitalism has the power to both include and exclude; to generate powerful desires at the same time as decreasing the certainty of employment required to fulfill these (Howanda and De Boeck 2005; Fitzgerald 2009). In this context, the city frequently emerges as a site for new claims (Sassen 2007). These kinds of contradictions have been explored in rapidly transforming urban settings in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Madagascar, for example, as well as on North American reserves (Weiss 2002; Jervis, Spicer et al. 2003; Cole 2004; Howanda and De Boeck 2005; Mains 2007; Musharbash 2007; Brown 2010; Willging, Quintero et al. 2011). However, in this thesis I explore these dynamics in a Canadian urban setting.
Chapter 3

Methods

The At-risk Youth Study

This thesis is the result of ethnographic fieldwork conducted from January 2008 through January 2013, as well as three waves of in-depth individual interviews conducted during the same time period. In 2008, I was hired as an ethnographer by the British Columbia Center for Excellence in HIV/AIDS to conduct a series of qualitative interviews with youth enrolled in the At-Risk Youth Study (ARYS; Wood 2006). At that time, I also conducted six months of exploratory fieldwork with the help of a youth research assistant, who was himself in the process of exiting the drug scene. It was Kyle who introduced me to the constellation of streets, parks, alleyways, shelters, SROs, drop-in centers and public transit in which the local drug scene came alive. In these places, I met youth who described themselves as highly “experienced” in street life, as well as those who had only been downtown a couple of times to socialize, use drugs and access services. It was during my time working

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10 The At-risk Youth Study (ARYS) is a large prospective cohort study of youth who use drugs. Eligibility criteria for this study include being between the ages of 14 and 26 and self-reported use of illicit drugs other than or in addition to marijuana in the past thirty days, at the time of enrollment.
with Kyle, and in the ARYS office doing a first wave of interviews, that I met many of the young people who participated in this project.

The interviews

A first wave of in-depth interviews occurred in the spring of 2008. Kyle and I recruited thirty-nine participants – 19 men and 20 women.\(^1\) Youth ranged from 16 to 26 years of age, with an average age of 22. For all three waves of interviews, approximately 70% of youth identified as Caucasian and approximately 30% identified as being of Aboriginal ancestry. Four youth identified as African Canadian.

From July 2009 to April 2010, a second wave of in-depth interviews was conducted. Twenty-eight youth were interviewed – 20 men and 8 women. Young people ranged 14 to 25 years of age, with an average age of 21. Interview participants were recruited at the ARYS office in the Downtown South. Youth enrolled in the ARYS cohort study frequent this office twice a year to complete an interviewer-administered questionnaire and provide a blood sample (for the purpose of screening for HIV and Hepatitis C infections). Many youth also drop in regularly to use the phone and drink coffee. All interviews during the first two waves of data collection occurred in this office. The frontline staff who administer the ARYS questionnaire would sometimes recommend that I approach a particular

\(^1\) Gender was self-identified by interview participants.
person for participation in my project based on their knowledge of my research interests. Other times, I approached youth based on relationships I had established with them previously, while spending time at the office and in the surrounding area. In 2010, follow-up interviews were conducted with 12 of these young people – 8 men and 4 women. Whether a follow-up interview occurred was largely determined by young people’s interest in my project and their ability to come in for a scheduled interview.

From January 2011 to January 2012, a third wave of in-depth interviews was conducted with the 25 youth (16 men and 9 women) who became the focus of my ethnographic research. Eleven of these youth I had first interviewed in 2008, and 6 I had first interviewed in 2009. The remaining 8 participants were either close friends of, or romantically involved with, these 17 youth. Young people by then ranged from 20 to 30 years of age, with an average age of 26.

**Fieldwork**

I had been conducting ethnographic fieldwork on an ongoing basis since 2008, including the exploratory fieldwork I did with Kyle, and a period of fieldwork extending from the fall of 2009 to the late spring of 2010 aimed at documenting the effects of the 2010 Olympics. This fieldwork generally involved spending time in the places frequented by youth, and engaging in informal conversations with young people in these places (which I was sometimes able to record).
From January 2011 to January 2013, I undertook more intensive fieldwork with a core group of 25 young people. During this time period, I maintained regular (at least monthly) contact with these youth. Ten of them I saw or spoke with at least once every two weeks. This fieldwork included the activities described above, as well as walking tours and the creation of a series of photo essays with youth.

**Walking tours**

During 2011 and 2012, I used walking tours led by youth to explore how, in particular moments, they understood, experienced and performed sense of place in the city (De Certeau 1984; Guano 2003; Malins, Fitzgerald et al. 2006; Irving 2007; Moretti 2008; Pink 2008; Irving 2010). These narrated tours allowed me to gain a richer, embodied sense of the places young people inhabited or longed to inhabit (Pink 2008). They also allowed me to get a sense of how different neighbourhoods, streets, alleyways, buildings and other physical landmarks possessed different mnemonic densities for youth, ranging from idiosyncratic and transient to more durable structures of feeling (Irving 2007).

Some young people gave me a tour of their SRO and the surrounding city blocks; they took me to the places where they bought and used their drugs, picked up their methadone scripts and monthly welfare cheques, and ate free meals. Others took me out to the suburbs, to look at childhood homes (many of which they were no longer welcome in) and neighbourhoods. As young people’s circumstances
changed, they proudly showed me new apartments and worksites. Some youth wanted to go to places they had never been before, such as Vancouver’s North Shore Mountains (a popular destination for tourists as well as those looking to “get away” from the city and engage in various leisure activities). Young people’s itineraries often reflected a desire to reimagine the possibilities of place in the city (Moretti 2008; Pink 2008; Biehl and Locke 2010). These narrated tours of “their Vancouver” inevitably implicated other remembered and imagined places within and beyond the city limits, underscoring the extent to which places become meaningful in tension with other places and wider social spatial landscapes (Massey 1994; Weiss 2002; Gordillo 2004; Moretti 2008).

When appropriate, I accompanied youth as they navigated various bureaucracies and systems. I stood in line with them in the offices where they received their welfare cheques and methadone scripts, and accompanied them while they cashed their cheques or went to “drink their juice” (methadone). I spent countless hours with them on public transit (buses, the SkyTrain) going to and from 12-step meetings and appointments with social workers, probation officers, doctors, drug and alcohol counselors, housing agencies and the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development (where a number of young people were involved in legal proceedings related to who would be granted permanent custody of their child or children). Some youth were eager to introduce me to the “normal” people who worked in these places, and to describe their involvement in my project. Others
were humiliated by these routines and the fact that the people working in these places could clearly tell the difference between us – between who was there to collect their cheque, drink their juice, and get a stamp to prove they were at a meeting so that they could “get their kids back” – and who was there as a tourist of sorts. This also happened on the streets; while some youth were eager to demonstrate the skilled ways in which they could navigate drug deals and interactions with various social actors – and occasionally brought me gifts of shoplifted clothes and toiletries – others abhorred the fact that those actors clearly identified me as different from them. Most people not involved in my project appeared mildly perplexed by my presence on the streets; if people approached me, they generally assumed that I had never used “hard” drugs and was in danger of being corrupted by the youth I accompanied. Some young people simply appreciated the fact that I provided a cover for their drug use in the less seedy parts of downtown Vancouver, since unlike them I was rarely suspected as being “up to no good” by the general public or the police.

*Photo essays*

During 2011 and 2012, I worked with ten youth on creating photo essays\(^{12}\) related to their sense of place in the city. Youth and I worked for several months on

\(^{12}\) The definition of photo essay I used when explaining this method to youth came from Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photo-essay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photo-essay)). Wikipedia defines a photo essay as a series of images that are intended to tell a story or evoke a series of emotions in the viewer. They range from purely photographic works, to photographs with captions, to written essays with a few or many accompanying photographs. Photo essays may be a series of ordered
these photo essays – developing a concept or theme, shooting and re-shooting particular images, and discussing individual images as well as how images worked together as an “essay.” Although youth were ultimately the ones taking the pictures, this process underscored that all image production in the context of fieldwork is collaborative to some extent (Banks 2001; Irving 2007). The process of moving through the city to shoot particular images (on foot, via public transit and occasionally by car) was similar to the walking tours, although these itineraries were usually much more ambitious and took several fieldwork sessions to cover.

The themes youth chose to pursue were diverse. One young woman focused on the kinds of “contrasts” that are visible in downtown Vancouver, and photographed places where wealth exists side by side with poverty (e.g., a covered bus stop featuring an advertisement for Giorgio Armani perfume that was also a popular sleeping place for the homeless). Another couple focused on the home-making project they were navigating in an attempt to get their children returned to them by the Ministry – a home-making project that implicated an elaborate geography of government and non-government agencies, food banks and 12-step meetings (which they were required to attend daily if they wanted to be successful).

The photo essays youth produced illustrated what was at stake in their lives during images, or they may consist of non-ordered images that can be viewed all at once. I presented youth with all of these options while we were developing their projects. In order to provide further clarity, I showed them different kinds of photo essays produced by a number of famous artists (e.g., Stephen Shore, Bruce Davidson, Sophie Calle). Youth differed in whether they wanted to sequentially order their photographs; however, none chose to include captions or other text as part of their photo essays.
a particular moment in time (Biehl 2009; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Biehl and Locke 2010). However, they also reflected youth’s desires to create new stakes in the city (as I will discuss further below). One young person approached his photo essay as a means of “objectively” documenting his daily life on the streets; the other nine approached the photo essays as art.

The value of incorporating visual methodologies into ethnographic research, including studies focused on drug use and urban poverty, is increasingly recognized (Singer, Stopka et al. 2000; Harrison 2002; Ranard 2002; Schonberg and Bourgois 2002; Biehl 2005; Rhodes, Briggs et al. 2006; Rhodes and Fitzgerald 2006; Irving 2007; Biehl 2009; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Irving 2010). The production of photography by youth was particularly valuable to my project because of the methodological challenges posed by phenomenological perspectives on sense of place and place-making, in which inner processes of memory, reverie and imagination are privileged (Bachelard 1994 [1958]; Basso 1996; Feld and Basso 1996; Fabian 2003; Irving 2007; Hogan and Pink 2010). The problem that I was faced with (as all anthropologists are, to an extent) was how to “access” these processes and affects, which are so central to the lived experience of particular places and yet so challenging to articulate (in the context of an in-depth interview, for example; Irving 2007; Stewart 2007). The walking tours were effective in surfacing some of the layers of experience sedimented into the urban landscape across time (it should be noted that the goal of performative methods like the walking tours and photo essays is not
to uncover an objective past or memory, but rather to produce what we call memory through the act of performance; Irving 2007; Irving 2010). However, the production of photo essays seemed to allow young people to re-engage with the city in relation to particular memories, life events and imagined futures in even more compelling ways. Perhaps, there was something about creating a permanent visual “record” of their sense of place in the city that raised the stakes of participation in this activity for youth. As mentioned above, the itineraries young people envisioned as part of their photo essays were much more ambitious in comparison to the walking tours. Youth were also much more adamant about photographing or not photographing particular places than they were about going or not going to particular places as part of their walking tours. The resulting images and photo essays facilitated some of our most lively and productive conversations about the themes of this study (Harper 2002). At the conclusion of my research, all ten young people agreed to share their images with each other, and became enthralled by the ways in which other people’s essays could speak to their own experiences. This provided a rich opportunity for further discussion.

Images taken from three of the photo essays produced by youth have been included at the end of each empirical chapter in this thesis. I make reference to these images in the text in order to make explicit for the reader some of the context in which these images were produced. However, the images I have chosen to include are not intended to be merely illustrative of my discussion in the text. These images,
and the photo essays they are drawn from, produced anthropological knowledge integral to this project and informed the textual analysis (Pink 2006; Hogan and Pink 2010). It was the photo essays, and the circumstances of their production (for example, the places youth insisted on photographing), that powerfully underscored for me young people’s desires for alternative forms of belonging and becoming in the city of Vancouver. Moreover, by making reference to the images in the text, I do not want to imply that there is a “true” meaning beneath the surface of the photographs, which exists independently of the ongoing negotiation of meanings between viewers and images – including the ongoing negotiation of meanings that occurred in the context of this project, as I discussed images with youth (Banks 2001; Pink 2006).

It has been argued that some elements of human experience – the sensory, for example – are better represented visually (Pink 2006). While I do not want to make that argument here, and recognize that the visual is only one aspect of sensory experience, I do believe that the images included in this thesis enrich the representation of anthropological knowledge produced by this research. The images youth created evoke embodied, sensory experiences in particular places – a local skateboarding park, a community garden, a construction site – that were inseparable from the processes of subjective experimentation they were working though, as they attempted to make sense of their place in the city in the context of this project.
All of the images included in this thesis are untitled, in accordance with the wishes of the photographer/artist. Youth expressed a desire for their real names to appear under the images they took; they did not want the pseudonyms used throughout this thesis for the purposes of confidentiality to appear instead. The fact that no people appear in the images is a result of strict institutional guidelines regarding the identification of minors in the context of illicit drug use and crime. It is interesting that all ten youth chose to take a self-portrait as part of their photo essay, but these images could not be included here. Canada’s laws prohibit the reproduction of a stranger’s image without his or her consent, so for practical reasons I instructed youth to ensure that there were no people in any of the shots they wanted to include in this thesis and other published work. Initially, this felt like a limitation, but as this thesis took shape the “emptiness” of the images became a part of what made them compelling. Photographs were taken using both film and digital cameras. They have not been edited or retouched subsequent to developing/uploading.

Ethics of the ethnographic encounter

Youth were paid CAD$20 for each formal and informal interview they completed. Interviews lasted a minimum of one hour and a maximum of three. Youth were paid CAD$40 for their participation in fieldwork sessions related to the walking tours and photo essays. These lasted a minimum of two hours. In
accordance with institutional ethical guidelines, young people provided their written consent prior to our first interview, and then again prior to participation in the “photo study.” This institutional procedure did not, however, address the ethics of obtaining “informed” consent at the outset of what would become a five-year project, at which time it was impossible for youth to foresee and weigh the potential consequences of “data” and “findings” that did not yet exist (Culhane 2011). This concern led me to approach informed consent as a process that emerged over time in the context of particular fieldwork encounters – including, notably, moments of misunderstanding and miscommunication (Pels 1999; Kazubowski-Houston 2010).

The debate surrounding the payment of research subjects, in particular those who use illicit drugs, is considerable (Buchanan, Khoshnood et al. 2002; Broadhead 2008; Scott 2008; Head 2009). The imperative of income generation in the context of severe material deprivation and addictions raises questions about the line between encouraging voluntary participation and coercion. While the latter is a significant concern, I must emphasize that most of the young people who participated in this project were highly accustomed to, and adept at, taking control of the research encounter to suit their interests and mood (Tomaselli 2003). These youth were part of a socially-worked and hyper-researched population. The volume of research, journalism, art projects and interventions being conducted in downtown Vancouver related to illicit drug use and “risk,” combined with the fact that youth were regularly required to tell their stories to police officers, social workers, doctors,
judges, etc. in return for some sort of benefit or reprieve, meant that they came into the research encounter with considerable savvy (Robertson and Culhane 2005). The practiced research “subject” and non-compliant teenage “trouble maker” – who could decide to challenge or ignore me at any particular moment – were just two of the subjectivities bound up with the maze of institutional and organizational encounters young people navigated everyday.

Given that researchers are compensated with salaries and other external awards – we are not merely volunteering our time for “the good of society,” whatever our political beliefs – expecting research subjects to participate in research activities on a purely voluntary basis, particularly when they are living in destitution, is deeply problematic. Participating in an interview or fieldwork session meant that youth had to take time away from other income generation activities essential to meeting their material needs. Although those activities were a central focus of my research, young people did not engage in sex work, robbery or higher volume drug dealing while I was present, for obvious reasons (Jeursen and Tomaselli 2002).

I often overheard youth describing to friends and relatives with pride the fact that they had a job working with a university researcher that paid $20 per hour. My experience was that when youth saw our relationship as something akin to an employer/employee relationship, they worked hard to maintain the integrity of that
relationship – by showing up for scheduled meetings on time, for example, and reflecting thoughtfully on the topics they knew I was interested in (the first thing they would often say when they saw me was something like, “Before I forget, I want to tell you about something that happened yesterday that has a lot to do with your research . . .”). As I developed closer relationships with some youth over time, a few did comment that they would “do the study for free” (although they knew they would not have to), and frequently invited me to spend more time with them than I could pay for. Eventually, I was invited to young people’s family homes and newly acquired apartments to socialize or on special occasions, with no expectation of payment other than a contribution of food, cigarettes or a small housewarming gift.

Youth had various motivations for participating in this project beyond financial incentives. They hoped this research could change people’s minds about them, and liked the idea that university students (like myself) might read their words and learn something. Many sought my help in filling out forms and creating resumes, researching the steps involved in getting their government IDs and social insurance cards, and doing housing and adult education program searches online. As they attempted to put together resumes, some asked if they could include their participation in this project and put me down as a reference. Even though youth were heavily embroiled in the drama of the scene, many complained about feeling bored, isolated and lonely. Some young people therefore sought out my company as often as I was willing to provide it.
We need to keep asking important questions about the meaning of “voluntary” participation in research, and the safety of those leaving a research office to go and score drugs within minutes of concluding an interview for which they were financially compensated (Buchanan, Khoshnood et al. 2002). Moreover, we should be wary of concluding that providing honoraria solves some of the ethical dilemmas raised by the power imbalance between researchers and research subjects in a setting like Vancouver’s inner city drug scene. The “exchange value” of our research products, as manifested in career enhancements of various kinds, is undeniably in excess of the capital invested (in the form of research honoraria as well as the provision of cigarettes, meals, bus tickets, etc.; Richer 1988). Nevertheless, compensating young people for their time was essential to the ethical integrity of this project, and instrumental in defining an unambiguous, working relationship between my research subjects and myself.

The politics of representation

As is common in anthropological approaches, data collection and analyses for this project occurred concurrently. All field and in-depth interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and managed and coded using ATLAS.TI software. In order to work through hundreds of pages of transcribed interviews and fieldnotes, an initial coding framework that captured broad emergent themes (e.g., violence and place) and analytic categories (e.g., symbolic violence) was generated. Subsequent
interviews and fieldwork allowed me to rework and refine the coding framework in an iterative process. I coded and re-coded fieldwork and interview data multiple times over the course of the study period.

While remaining cognizant of confidentiality issues (many of the youth who participated in this project knew each other on some level, and it was therefore important to emphasize that what one person said would under no circumstances be repeated to another person), evolving interpretations of the data were discussed with youth, both informally in the field and more formally in interviews. This process was used to inform the focus and direction of subsequent interviews (e.g., through the addition of new questions and the deletion of others), as well as fieldwork (e.g., through an increased emphasis on the relationship between place and imagined futures).

More refined analyses were guided by a phenomenological commitment to exploring the multiple and unfinished meanings bound up in the urban landscape, as well as a focus on the processes of political economy and power that make some place worlds more enduring than others. Combining these perspectives into a dynamic analytic proved challenging. Heavy reliance on materialist concepts like social suffering and structural, symbolic and everyday violence can foreclose the possibility of letting things be in-process and yet-to-be-determined (Biehl 2005). At the same time, a postmodern focus on fluidity and flux can neglect the sheer
materiality of life’s necessities and the state of crisis that many young people find themselves in (Bourgois 1996). Following others (Garcia 2010), in working though my data I attempted to keep in mind that it is particularly among those who describe feeling “stuck” in place and caught within ascribed identities that we must find a way of evoking this sense of fixity without further locking youth into these locations and subject positions (Clifford 1988; Malkki 1997).

This thesis begins from the assumption that the “data” created through the events of fieldwork and in-depth interviews is highly contingent and improvisational, dialogical rather than observational, and the result of performative rather than informative encounters between researcher and research subjects (Fabian 1990; Castañeda 2006; Cerwonka and Malkki 2007). Even office-based interviews are highly reflexive performances, in which questions of to whom, when, how and why young people were engaged in these acts of telling, retelling, imagining and remembering are of primary importance (Fabian 1990; Denzin 2001).

Today we understand that we write culture, and that writing is not an innocent practice (Tedlock 1991; Denzin 2001). Even transcription is an interpretive act; it is always to an extent a translation mediated by the researcher’s subjectivity (Bird 2005). And good translation is not necessarily word for word (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). The narrative excerpts included in this thesis have been edited to more closely reflect how I experienced young people’s speech during interviews and
in the field. In a number of instances I have removed stutters and repetitive ums and ahs, and corrected grammatical errors. I have also condensed longer sections of transcribed conversations and narrative into the excerpts included below for the sake of brevity. I have not used ellipses to denote the omission of narrative text, but have used square brackets to denote where text has been added for clarity (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). Also, the altering of some narrative details was necessary to protect the identities of the young people who participated in this project.

I conducted in-depth interviews with 71 youth in total. My fieldnotes contain references to a large number of other individuals who were present in the various places where I conducted fieldwork. The analyses I present in the chapters that follow draw from this network of relationships – some of which were formed during a single in-depth interview, some through repeated, chance encounters in the field, and some through interactions over a number of years. However, in this thesis I present only a limited number of central characters, drawn primarily from the 25 young people who became the focus of my ethnographic fieldwork, in order to illustrate the thematic and theoretical arguments that emerged from this research.
Chapter 4

Belonging on the Streets

The interview room

From the outside, the ARYS office is barely distinguishable from the legal practice beside it, providing a degree of anonymity for the youth who go in and out. Each time the door to the office opens, a mechanical voice that is part of the alarm system repeats “Front door,” “Front door,” followed immediately by a ding ding ding sound once the door is closed again. Inside, rows of chairs lined up against the walls create a waiting area. There is a coffee machine in one corner and a dresser full of donated clothes and toiletries in another. In the back of the room is a desk with an aging computer, which is used by the project staff to track study participants. On the walls are newer posters demonstrating various safer dope cooking procedures, and an older one that shows the steps for safer injecting through a series of anonymous photographs. In 2012, some of the photography that youth produced for this project was put up, followed by a flat screen TV so that study participants could watch movies on Netflix while they waited their turn to do an interview. Thick doors and curtains separate the two interview rooms from the chaos of the outside hallway, through which participants trudge back and forth to use the washroom and see the
study nurse. Young people and I would sit in one of these rooms at a plastic coated table, facing each other with the audio recorder between us. A single lamp provided dim, unobtrusive lighting. While we spoke, some youth would obsessively arrange and rearrange the contents of their backpacks. Others would put their head in their arms on the table to rest.

**Introduction**

“I think we’re all – *drug users*. I don’t think it has anything to do with community,” Daniel said flatly. He was 22 years old when I first met him at the ARYS office in 2008, and had been on and off the streets since he was 13 years old. “It’s every man for himself. But I mean, my friends are my friends, right? I’d do anything for them.” I had asked him whether he thought there was such a thing as a drug user or street youth community\(^{13}\) in Vancouver. The answer he provided sums up the ambivalence many youth felt towards the language of community in reference to their everyday lived experience on the streets – even if they would “do anything for their friends.”

\(^{13}\) In contrast to other settings, perhaps, the youth who participated in this research did not often differentiate between “the drug user community” and “the street youth community” when considering whether there was such a thing as “community” on the streets of Vancouver. Throughout the rest of this thesis, I use the phrases “drug user community” and “the community” (which were more commonly employed by youth) in those instances where young people did not differentiate between the two, rather than repeatedly referring to “the drug user or street youth community.”
Community is a notoriously ambiguous concept. It is used with diverse referents, from shared aspects of lifestyle to ethnic groupings to socioeconomic status within broader social structures. Communities can be imagined; they can be based on a shared idea of people’s affinity to one another (Anderson 1983). They can also be based on everyday interaction in particular social and physical spaces, and a shared connection to place (Gigengack 2000). Communities can be temporary. At one moment, the community label may be politically expedient; at another, this label may become counterproductive in the ways that it obscures diversity. People can claim membership in many communities simultaneously; yet, our membership in some communities necessarily precludes membership in others. Communities always reflect systems of inclusion and exclusion. However, even when community is delineated largely according to physical geography, the boundaries of these communities are never static because historical, social, political and economic processes continually alter the landscapes in which local worlds are enclosed (Massey 1994; Kleinman and Fitz-Henry 2007). The boundaries that separate one community from another are often blurred, shifting and overlapping, as the clusters of meanings bound up in community are continually renegotiated and redefined by social actors with multiple social positions and roles (Hannerz 1992). Community is therefore a lived category that is constantly changing in the context of everyday experience.
Social science and public health discourse is frequently informed by what have been referred to as *assumed communities* (Singer 2006) – social groupings characterized by a degree of shared social interaction, interests, experience and perspective among constituent members. The drug user community exemplifies an assumed community. The language of community is built into research focused on drug use from the earliest stages. The recruitment, cooperation and “collaboration” of community partners – organizations that can represent and protect the collective interests of the wider group – are frequent requirements of funding and ethics applications (Henman, Paone et al. 1998; Goldberg-Freeman, Kass et al. 2007). Community-based services are also frequently approached by researchers to facilitate the recruitment of a “representative” study sample. Both researchers and a particular politics of public health have increasingly used the language of community to communicate that people who use drugs are capable of self-determination, self-regulation, and health-promotion within *their own communities* (Friedman, de Jong et al. 1993; Nettleton and Bunton 1995; Rhodes and Hartnoll 1996; Roe 2005; Moore and Fraser 2006). This politics has, in turn, shaped policy and funding decisions regarding how to best “intervene” within the community in order to prevent “risk” and reduce harms (Murray 2011).

In spite of a firm commitment to the language of community in public health, policy and academic discussions about drug users, it has been argued previously that the parameters of these communities, and the extent to which they are
characterized by shared social interaction, interests, experience and perspective, is far from self-evident in many settings (Hengst 1997; Gigengack 2000; Beazley 2003; Singer 2006). I do not dispute the idea that meaningful, long term change in patterns of harm among inner city drug-using populations should be the result of locally-informed and locally-produced initiatives, as opposed to top-down approaches that are largely incongruent with local realities. Nor do I want to question the political power of employing the language of community in struggles over recognition. However, I follow others in recognizing that the notion of a single drug user or street youth community may be a politicized fiction, which tends to ignore the fact that even relatively coherent political movements are always constituted by numerous and contradictory lived realities that are not easily grouped together in any simple or stable way (Read 1980; Thornton 1996; Moore 2004; Beyrer, Malinowska-Sempruch et al. 2010). While this complexity has been relatively well explored in the international literature on street children and youth (Hengst 1997; Gigengack 1999; Gigengack 2000; Beazley 2002; Beazley 2003), my research adds to a small body of work exploring these dynamics in North American settings (Singer 2006).

In this chapter, I explore the complex and often contradictory perspectives young people expressed regarding the notion of community in the context of drug scene entrenchment – both over the course of a single interview, and over the course of my study period. The longevity of patterns of residence in the Downtown
Eastside, and of various grassroots services operating there, mean that this neighbourhood is often attributed a strong sense of community, both by residents and elements of the general public (Roe 2009/10). The Downtown South is now home to several services aimed specifically at Vancouver’s street youth population, including a medical clinic, shelter and popular drop-in center for those 21 years of age and under. The ARYS office is a part of the Downtown South service landscape for many local youth; there is almost always a nurse on site, and we frequently distribute donated clothing, toiletries, food and harm reduction supplies to study participants. In contrast to the strong sense of community attributed to the drug-using population in the Downtown Eastside, however, a sense community among young drug users in the Downtown South is less commonly embraced, both in the media and by young people themselves, for reasons I explore in this chapter.

I began this chapter with a description of the setting in which many of my formal in-depth interviews took place in order to emphasize that youth’s contradictory and at times markedly dystopian responses to my inquiries about community were shaped by questions of to whom, when, how and why young people were engaged in these acts of telling (e.g., to a researcher they may have viewed as indistinguishable from other professionals, in an office they may have viewed as a part of the service landscape; Fabian 1990). As I will discuss further below, youth’s narratives about community on the streets were highly performative, and unmade various claims made for and about them by researchers and other
professionals – for example, claims of truth (there is a drug user community),
coherence (youth who use drugs on the streets are a part of this community),
authenticity (they are representative of this community), and resistance (the
community is an expression of opposition to “mainstream society”; Spivak 1999).
Their responses challenged my assumptions about social support in the context of
marginality, and forced me to listen to their desires for things to be otherwise in the
city (Biehl and Locke 2010).

The contradictions of community

The youth who participated in this research deployed the language of
community in different ways at different moments, and to achieve different ends.
Consistent with conventional understandings, a majority of young people indicated
that the drug user community implied commonality. “I’m being a drug addict right
now,” Amanda said during an interview I did with her in 2008. She obsessively
tucked her hair behind her ears as we spoke. Amanda was 17 years old, and
currently going back and forth between her grandparents’ house in East Vancouver
and the Downtown Eastside, where she bought and used morphine. She continued,
“I think you lose your place, right? They’re not accepted somewhere else and they
find acceptance down there in a certain sort of way, not that they go looking for
acceptance, but they become a drug addict down there, and then they stay there
because there’s kind of a community.” Youth often switched to the third person
when attempting to distance themselves from their current circumstances (Robertson 2006). “And everybody bands together in a certain way. At least it’s something. And you’re all fucked so you might as well be in it together. No one else is going to take you, so.” She paused. “It’s not like you can walk up to UBC and go on the campus and be like ‘Hi guys. I’m just going to shoot up here, okay? And then we’ll hang out and go to class. Cool?’”

A sense of community on the streets could be constructed in relation to shared social spatial exclusions. It could also be rooted in shared histories of social suffering extending back to childhood, and a long term connection with the infrastructure of services that aim to address that suffering. This was particularly the case among youth who described themselves as “growing up on the streets,” with parents who were heavily involved in drug use and crime. “Yeah there’s a community! That’s why my pack is so oversized,” Rayna explained during our first interview in 2008, as if the connection should be obvious. She was 18 years old, and the de facto leader of a group of youth I came to know who referred to themselves as “the Lost Boys” (after the story of Peter Pan and the popular film of that title about a gang of teenage Vampires). “I’ve got everything a person needs, including the kitchen sink! I have books, pens, markers, Band-Aids, gauze, Polysporin, needles, a dirty box [for safely discarding used syringes].” She removed the items from her backpack and laid them out on the table between us. “I do my own independent outreach. I always pick up used rigs [syringes] off the ground, and I never throw them in the garbage, I
always hold onto them in my bag – even if they’re not mine – until I find a box or I see the outreach van. The van goes almost anywhere, which is so important,” she explained matter-of-factly. “I knew the original guy that started the whole thing, and I know the guy that is running things now.”

Services are often understood as responsive to and/or representative of pre-existing communities. In many ways, however, they create particular configurations of community and belonging through the programs (e.g., street-based outreach), technologies (e.g., harm reduction education) and discourses (e.g., human rights) they deploy (Nguyen 2005; Roe 2009/10; Murray 2011). These various elements are taken up by youth and engender multiple regimes of living and subjectivities on the streets, including the responsible community member who does outreach and conducts needle sweeps. For Rayna and the other Lost Boys, these activities did not just signal positive membership in the drug user community. In many moments, they signaled meaningful citizenship within what youth generally referred to as “mainstream society” as well. The society that youth like Rayna envisioned included those members of the drug user community who were capable of certain forms of “responsibility” – who picked up discarded syringes, and practiced safer injecting, for example – recalling a neoliberal politics of public health that emphasizes the self-determining and self-regulating drug-using subject (Foucault 1995 [1977]; Roe 2005; Moore and Fraser 2006). “I know what it’s like to be a part of the street team, but I also know what it’s like and what it means to be civil and a part of society. I
Rayna emphasized to me in a second interview in 2008. “I put a big yellow dirties box on the other side of the Burrard Bridge [the main bridge connecting Westside Vancouver to the Downtown South]. I tacked it up. People use it. It’s actually the only one on that side of the bridge out there. It’s mostly normal people over there, you know? So it’s good for everyone.”

For many youth, the commonality implied by a drug user community was constructed as negative. Youth consistently questioned the value of membership in a community where the dominant shared experiences were those of exclusion, destitution and sickness (Shoveller, Johnson et al. 2007). I met Tom in 2008 when he was 22, and saw him frequently because he often slept under the overhang in front of the ARYS office. During our first interview, I asked him whether there was such a thing as a shared body of knowledge or “street smarts” among youth in the scene. “Being street smart means staying away from certain kinds of people,” he reflected vaguely. “Knowing a spot where to sleep where no one robs you while you’re sleeping, or beats you up. Yeah, I’m street smart, but I don’t want to be street smart anymore,” he sighed. “Right now I have to be. But like, I want to get – I’m gonna get a hotel room, today [in the Downtown South]. I’m gonna get a job in like, a week. Full-time job. Good pay. Get my own apartment in like a month or two. Or a house. I guess every homeless person is part of the community,” he concluded suddenly, referring back to my earlier question about who constituted “the community” on the streets. Even as he imagined future possibilities in the city, he sounded defeated.
“But I don’t want to be in that community forever. I want to rejoin society again. Be a slave for the government, go to work. And contribute something, you know? Normal life kinda things.”

Tom lamented rather than celebrated his membership in the community. While some youth, like Rayna, seemed to be able to reconcile their membership in the drug user community with responsible citizenship in mainstream society, others, like Tom, maintained a strong conceptual distinction between the community and “society.” They understood their membership in the former as precluding meaningful forms of belonging in the latter, and yet “rejoining society” was something that many youth dearly wanted. Rather than emphasizing the responsibilities of the state to its citizens – to promote various kinds of inclusion, for example – many youth emphasized the duties owed by citizens to the state – such as a responsibility to get a “real,” nine-to-five job (Collier and Lakoff 2005). Like Rayna’s articulation of the responsible drug-using subject, Tom’s desire for a “normal life” and waged citizenship were also intimately linked to neoliberal criteria – this time regarding economic productivity (Ong 2006).

The latter citizenship-making projects grew more acute as youth entered their early to mid twenties and began to age out of the youth-focused services in the Downtown South. As they got older, youth were increasingly forced to utilize the adult-focused services in the Downtown Eastside to meet their needs – or attempt to
change their lives in ways that meant they would not have to become a part of this “community of clients” (Visano 1990; Lucchini 1996; Garrett, Higa et al. 2008; Roe 2009/10; Shoveller, Chabot et al. 2011). The Downtown South and Downtown Eastside were part of a day-to-day reality in which young people needed to procure material necessities like money, drugs, food, clothing and shelter. But these neighbourhoods also did important symbolic work; they communicated through condensed meanings, which could be “unmoored” from the landscape and transformed into instruments of thought as well as tools for action (Feldman 1991; Woolford 2001; Mitchell 2002). For example, the open drug use and physical degradation that characterizes the area surrounding the Main and Hastings intersection could powerfully signal the Downtown Eastside as a lawless, “junkie” space that has been all but abandoned by the general public – with the exception, perhaps, of the service providers and researchers who work there (Radcliffe and Stevens 2008). In many moments “ending up down there,” destitute and addicted to drugs and living in an SRO, symbolized “giving up hope” on ever becoming a “productive” member of society (Castro and Lindbladh 2004; Krusi, Fast et al. 2010). In contrast, the Downtown South could symbolize the possibility of different kinds of futures in the city. It was frequently envisioned as a neighbourhood where “normal” people lived, worked and relaxed. By maintaining a presence in the area, therefore, many youth sought to explicitly distance themselves from the physical and existential “ruin” of the Downtown Eastside (Ruddick 1996; Fast, Shoveller et al.)
2009). Tom, for example, told me in 2008 that he preferred to sleep outside and panhandle for food in the Downtown South rather than access a shelter bed and free meals in the Downtown Eastside, where he feared he might become “too reliant” on services and as a result “never leave” (two years later, however, he was indeed living in an SRO in the neighbourhood, where he was able to access three hot meals a day within a few blocks radius of his hotel room).

Even Rayna and the other Lost Boys adamantly rejected a romanticized notion of community on the streets. This emerged most forcefully when they talked about youth who were new to the scene – a topic many brought up when I questioned them about the idea of a drug user or street youth community in Vancouver. It seemed that my naiveté on the topic brought to mind the equally naïve views they felt were shared by many newcomers. “They’re idiots. Kids that are Weekend Warriors, as I like to call them!” Rayna said angrily. “Kids that come down here and think they’re all that and a bag of Doritos when really they’re just a bag of plain chips. Kids that walk around here [in the Downtown South] are kids that if they came to the Downtown Eastside would not make it one fucking day without getting hot-shotted [being provided with a substance that will cause an overdose or toxic reaction], or killed in some way by kids like me.”

“Why don’t you like them?” I asked.
“Because they have homes, they have good parents,” Rayna imagined, although this was rarely the case. “They have access to services down here that I wish I had at their age. And they come down here, and think it’s cool to be a fucking drug addict, and think it’s cool to fucking be hanging out on the streets all night, and causing shit and dealing drugs, when for us, when we deal drugs, that’s for us to live. We don’t have homes, we don’t have parents. For us, it was a painful struggle and it still is. Get the fuck out, if you come from a white picket fence town. Yuppies cannot turn into junkies.”

Nick’s views were markedly similar to Rayna’s. “I don’t like new kids, man,” he said during out first interview in 2008. He was 21 years old, and had been living in the Downtown South with “no fixed address” on and off for several years.

“Twinkies, I call them. New kids come down here, go to Passages [the largest youth drop-in center in the Downtown South] a couple of times, and they think living on the street is cool. You know? They think it’s all one big happy family, or ‘community,’ or whatever. And it is a community, but like, everyone who’s down here is like, trying to get off the streets, you know what I mean? Most people that come down here nowadays are young kids – 13, 14, 15 years old. And I’m like, ‘What are you guys doing here?’ ‘Oh yeah, I left my mom’s house, because of this and that,’” he imitated. “And I’m like, ‘Well, do you got a place to go?’ ‘Yeah, we got a place, but we’re not going.’ I’m like, ‘Yo, straight up – half these people down here, if they had
a chance to go home, they would, yo. Go home! Make up with your parents!' It’s not a fun life.”

Twinkies and Weekend Warriors usually came from other towns and cities in British Columbia, or from the outlying cities that comprise Greater Vancouver. They initially moved in and out of the downtown core for varying periods of time via buses and the SkyTrain line. As they became entrenched in drug use, homelessness and material deprivation, they increasingly relied on the services located in downtown Vancouver to meet their needs. Many of the youth who participated in this study could themselves have been defined as Twinkies or Weekend Warriors at one point in time. While some newcomer youth were accepted into the community relatively quickly (these were generally youth who had previously been involved in drug scenes in other Canadian cities, and were considered “hardcore”), those who were perceived as being able to come and go as they pleased from other homes were viewed far less favorably by youth like Rayna and Nick, in spite of shared experiences of social suffering in many instances (Bourgois 1996; Sterk 1999). Narratives about “hot-shotting” or “killing” inexperienced youth were not literal accounts of past events, however. Such narratives were highly performative; often, they seemed to be more reflective of young people’s strong rejection of romanticized notions of community and belonging on the streets (Gigengack 1999). Youth attributed this romanticized view to Twinkies and Weekend Warriors who, they imagined, came downtown with the idea that being a part of the community was
“fun” and “not that hard,” since there were now a large number of services located in both the Downtown South and Downtown Eastside.

Interestingly, some young people also seemed to attribute a romanticized view of community and belonging on the streets to researchers (and perhaps some service providers) as well. It became clear over the course of the interview process that in many instances youth were angered and annoyed by what they thought I thought about the community – namely, that it was a positive context in which youth were able to support and care for one another, and derive a sense of meaningful belonging in the city. “I don’t get this about people!” Aaron said aggressively in 2009. He was 15 years old, and had been sleeping outside in a park a few blocks from the ARYS office for several months. “Like, oh, ‘the street youth community,’” he imitated sarcastically, “‘Oh, it’s so cool to sleep on the street,’ ‘Oh, you’ve got to be street smart to live on the streets.’ Anyone can easily drop a blanket on the ground and just lay down and throw another blanket over top of them, and there: they’re on the street. This place is a gong show [crazy, out-of-control]. There is nothing good about it. It is really, really, really, really, really, really stupid how people talk about how you got to be like ‘street smart’ to be on the streets and stuff like that. And this is a ‘community’. Being street smart means not being on the streets. I don’t know why but I hate that question.”
When I next saw Rayna and the other Lost Boys, they were with another group of youth in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery in the Downtown South, a popular hang out and drug dealing spot prior to the city-sponsored “clean up” effort that preceded the 2010 Olympics (and later the site of Occupy Vancouver). The group they were with included at least one person I knew to be new to the scene. Before I left, I gestured towards a young girl I had spoken to the day before the ARYS office and asked Rayna, “So, are Twinkies part of the community?”

“Of course they are,” Rayna admitted, smiling. “They make the community the community. If it wasn’t for Twinkies, we wouldn’t all be so excited, there wouldn’t be all this drama and shit. We’d be bored out of our fucking minds! Twinkies make the party. Twinkies are safe as long as they don’t fuck around. Just don’t come down here and start dealing drugs on our block, or screwing our men – if they’re women.” She continued in a more serious tone, “My advice for Twinkies and Warriors, if you want to be down here, get to know someone who knows what they’re doing and stay close to them. A bigger dog. The fucking bigger the better, you know what I mean?”

Shared moral codes

In spite of the contradictions of community and belonging on the streets, “the community” nevertheless implied solidarity for a majority of youth. Young people frequently described shared moral codes, for example, which included the advice
Rayna had for Twinkies and Weekend Warriors regarding encroaching on other youth’s drug dealing territory, and staying away from young men who were spoken for. Youth also described a widely accepted moral code and sense of *community responsibility* that prohibited them from initiating newcomers into more harmful forms of drug use, and into neighbourhoods like the Downtown Eastside. For a majority of youth, these two initiations went hand in hand (Fast, Shoveller et al. 2009; Fast, Small et al. 2010).

“*I know fricking 12 year olds who do this stuff down here,*” Brody said angrily, gesturing at the glass pipe he was using to smoke crystal meth. Kyle and I were crouched with him in an alleyway in the Downtown South. Brody was 23, and had been on the streets for ten years. “*That makes me mad. I won’t do it with them. I was at a party, and I found out this little 12 year old girl was all high on meth. We kicked her out of the house. And called her mom. I’m like, I don’t care how mad everyone gets at me for this. She’s 12. I’m not gonna have a 12 year old high in my presence. And be responsible if she ODs [overdoses]. I have a nine year old sister. Like, I won’t do it. And I’ll threaten murder on anyone I see allowing that.*”

“But then that’s what happened to you – you were introduced to crack by your friend who was already down here [when he first became involved in the scene],” I commented. I had done an in-depth interview with Brody in the ARYS office one month prior to reconnecting with him in the alley.
“It did happen to me. I wasn’t 12 though, I was almost 14 years old. By then, like, I had a head on my shoulders, right?” Brody insisted.

In most cases, youth told these stories about a collective responsibility to protect at the very same time as admitting they had themselves been initiated into more harmful forms of drug use by someone older and more experienced. On the streets, illusions of moral order and boundary management frequently gave way to practical considerations (Gigengack 1999). “It was hard for me to get heroin at first on my own, after my boyfriend got arrested,” Nancy recalled during my second in-depth interview with her in 2008. She was 18, and had been living downtown on a more permanent basis with a few different boyfriends for two years. “No one wanted to get it for me cause I was so young – I was 14 – and I had never really injected it, right? Two days after my boyfriend got arrested though, I eventually got some girl to pick up some for me, right? Like, she basically – you know, she’s the type of person that will go around saying, ‘Yeah, man, anyone who gives drugs to fucking, anybody under 19, I’m gonna punch them out.’ But then, because I had the money and she was going to get a taste? Obviously, she’s going to do it. I’m paying for the drugs, so she’ll fucking inject me, right?”

Youth’s emphasis on shared moral codes and a community responsibility to protect newcomer youth can be read as an example of how a neoliberal politics of public health can at times be appropriated by young people to counter pervasive,
stigmatizing discourses (e.g., the junkie as motivated by compulsive desires and pure self interest; Moore and Fraser 2006). In some moments perhaps, these politics can be experienced as empowering. However, these politics can also obscure the material conditions that powerfully shape “choice” among young people living and using drugs in the margins. A sense of community responsibility does not always translate into action, as for example when young people initiate newcomers into injecting in order to “get a taste” for themselves. In these instances, such politics can actually reinforce experiences of symbolic violence when young people fail to live up to the standards of the “responsible” community member – a failure that may be shaped in large part by social structural constraints, but is embodied and experienced as a personal shortcoming (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourgois and Schonberg 2007; Fast, Shoveller et al. 2009).

Finally, I observed that even youth who adamantly denied the existence of community on the streets in most moments were willing to align themselves with “the community” when reflecting on the pervasiveness of police arrest and violence in Vancouver. “That’s the one thing we all agree on. We’re all against the cops,” Laura laughed. She was 19 and three months pregnant when I first interviewed her in 2008. At that time, Laura and Nick had been in a relationship for approximately six months, and the two of them were staying at a combination of shelters and friends’ places in the Downtown South. “The police force here is like the most fucked up police force I’ve ever seen. It’s, like, the only place I’ve ever been where
you could be harassed by the police four or five times in an hour. Violently. Like, different situations. Different cops.” Youth frequently helped each other to evade police, and advocated for each other while an arrest or harassment was taking place. The notion of a drug user community was constructed in opposition to law enforcement efforts that were viewed as imposing undue discrimination on the urban poor (Lucchini 1996; Ruddick 1998). This sense of solidarity was reinforced by the politics of place surrounding the Olympics (in which protesters demanded “housing not Games” for the city’s homeless), and later, the Occupy Movement. In the year leading up to the Olympics, rumors circulated that the city planned to forcibly remove and relocate the homeless from the downtown core. “They’re cleaning up the street. They’re handing out fucking tickets to every homeless person for whatever, J-walking, spitting, throwing a cigarette butt, whatever they can,” Janet explained angrily when I first interviewed her in 2009. She was 19 and living in a shelter in the Downtown Eastside. “And we can’t pay these things. [The police are] gonna let them ride until the Olympics come and then” – she snapped her fingers – “bam! They’re gonna pick them all up on warrants and throw them in jail. It’s gonna happen, guaranteed. The jails are going to be packed. I’m trying to figure things out so I can work with some people to get these tickets thrown out for all of the youth.”

A strong sense of us-versus-them could dissolve rapidly, however, once other concerns – namely, the procurement of material necessities – regained primacy. The language of community was employed at one moment to signal a collective struggle
against a common enemy; at another, it became unnecessary, irrelevant or inappropriate (Hengst 1997). The one exception was that no member of the community could “rat” – i.e., aid the police in tracking down and arresting other youth – at any time. The punishment for this was extreme acts of retributive violence and total ostracism. Thus, permanent conformity to shared moral codes and community values was demanded on some level.

**The romance of resistance**

As the above discussion suggests, the language of community in reference to young people who use drugs on the streets can have political connotations – it can signal a group of individuals with shared experiences of discrimination, who have the potential to turn those shared experiences into solidarity and organized resistance. Among the youth who participated in this study, community could be a powerful political tool in asserting a collective right to the city, and to sheer life (Lefebvre 1968; Collier and Lakoff 2005; Harvey 2008). Equally, the language of community could obscure the experiences of those youth who did not understand their sense of place in Vancouver through a lens of resistance (to their mistreatment by “mainstream society,” for example; Mahmood 2005).

I met Lee when he was 20 years old and living at a shelter in East Vancouver. When I asked if I could follow up with him after our first interview in 2008, he

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immediately distanced himself from my project – a project that implied a relatively stable grouping or community of drug-using youth. “Actually, I was thinking about finishing my [high]school this year, right,” he told me, “just to go to college or something. I wanna pursue certain dreams, right? I’m gonna get a place and I’m gonna get a job here really soon, so I probably won’t be around these services here that much.” In fact, Lee became one of the central participants in this study.

When he and I were working on his photo essay in 2012, I was struck by the numerous images he had taken of Vancouver’s most desirable downtown living spaces and parks, and of various construction sites (Figure 4, 5, 6, 7). I immediately assumed he was developing a political commentary – on gentrification, for example – until Lee started to point out small details in the images and explained that he planned to get a job in construction doing a particular kind of welding, once he had “pulled his life together” (Figure 7). His images of different sports apparatus reminded me of his reaction to the Olympics (Figure 8, 9). While some youth expressed strong resistance to the Games, in ways that aligned with the throngs of protesters in downtown Vancouver demanding “housing not Games,” others, like Lee, looked forward to being a part of them. As a Native youth and “one of the true, original Canadians,” Lee felt included within Vancouver’s celebrated multiculturalism. For many of the young people who participated in this project, the 2010 Olympics temporarily ruptured the politics of place in the city – rather than highlighting their exclusion, the Games created space for desired forms of urban
citizenship. “I’m excited for hockey, snowboarding, downhill skiing, even bobsleigh,” Lee told me during an interview in 2010, one week before the opening ceremonies. “I think I’m just going to have a good time and watch it, you know? They delivered a new TV to the shelter [in the Downtown Eastside] where I’m staying and everything.” Even when I asked him explicitly if he had heard about all the political “stuff” that was going on, he replied, “There’s no negative I see. I’m excited to walk around the city, and see so many people from all over the world, you know? And to go on that big zip-line they put up [between two buildings].”

Lee had cycled through government care throughout his entire childhood, and was in 2010 living in substandard SRO housing in the Downtown Eastside (it was so substandard that he frequently opted to stay outside or in shelters instead, rather than deal with bed bug infestations, constant noise and violent incidents in his building nearly every night). And yet he embraced the Olympics, which diverted millions of dollars in public spending that could have been used to improve the material conditions of his life. Similarly, Lee’s photo essay was not focused on his marginality, but on the comfortable “Vancouver lifestyle” he imagined for himself in the future – going to work, living in a “nice” neighbourhood, and playing sports in the evenings and on the weekends. It could be argued Lee “misrecognized” his marginalization, while youth like Janet actively resisted it. But we should be wary of creating a politically proscriptive dichotomy between resistance as agency and conformity as subordination (Mahmood 2005). Such an understanding imposes a
teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of place, power and desire – a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand senses of place among those occupying the margins that are not necessarily encapsulated by narratives of resistance (Escobar 2001).

**Being connected**

Particularly among the young women in this study, community also implied *stability*. Consistent with Rayna’s advice, young women often did align themselves romantically with a “bigger dog” – usually a young man who was “connected” in the world of street-level drug dealing and gang-related crime. These relationships positioned women favorably within the community in terms of access to essential resources such as income, drugs, food, shelter, prestige and protection. However, consistent with previous work (Beazley 2002; Bourgois, Prince et al. 2004), it was equally acknowledged that these networks frequently positioned women unfavorably and could expose them to extreme violence.

“Do you know how many street people would kill someone trying to hurt a woman?” Mickey insisted. He was 24 when Kyle introduced us at Mickey’s usual panhandling spot in the Downtown South. I had asked him about the high levels of violence that seemed to be a part of the scene – including the violence that occurred between young men and women. “Do you understand?” he continued emphatically.
“You yell help, do you know how many people like me are going to run out? That person will get beat down or killed by someone like me.”

In spite of a moral imperative to protect young women, on the streets violence was considered a common sense way to resolve problems and assert hierarchies within romantic relationships (Bourgois, Prince et al. 2004). “I hang out with the big times, because I've earned that right and I stay very close to them because so help me God, if anything ever happened to me, they'd have my back right away,” Rayna boasted. “It’s called respect. I had to work my way up the chain. I went from going out with loser guys to going out with my boyfriend, who's at the top of the list. And who's the ultimate street fighter. You get $300 purses, you get shopping sprees. Drugs whenever you want. Slurpees delivered to you whenever you want,” she laughed, gesturing to the cold drink one of her friends had delivered to her half way through our interview. “But you also get a lot of bad things too.”

“What are the bad things?” I asked.

“Here, I’ll show you.” Rayna unzipped her sweatshirt and pulled down her T-shirt to reveal a large scar on her shoulder. “He burnt me with a torch. I deserved it though, I really did. I called him a goof.”

“Do – do you think that that goes along with having a well-connected boyfriend?” I stammered. Encounters like this, in which the tremendous violence
experienced and perpetrated by youth suddenly became visible, were one of the most challenging and confronting aspects of this research.

“Yeah. Violence, the beatings, the burnings. I’ve been hospitalized before because of him. I always have to watch my back down there [in the Downtown Eastside]. My boyfriend, my boyfriend’s friends, my boyfriend’s workers [people who are dealing drugs for him]. You know, everywhere you go you turn and look, to make sure none of his workers are coming for you, or see what you’re doing, or hear what you’re saying.” In particular, Rayna worried about someone catching her using or procuring drugs *without* her boyfriend – which was a frequent occurrence. For young women on the streets, the loyalty demanded by romantic relationships with young men was often at odds with a desire to score drugs quickly from wherever and whomever possible. This desire could outweigh a commitment to honor a boyfriend’s sense of control over his girlfriend’s drug procurement and use. The consequence for doing so when caught, however, was often extreme acts of violence.

Regardless of whether the idea of community resonated with them, youth agreed that on the streets, “everyone knew everyone,” which meant that tracking people down for punishments related to drug debts or altercations within romantic relationships was relatively easy. This led a number of youth to the conclusion that “nowhere was safe” in the context of the scene (including service locations), and that
the only way to avoid violence was to “be everywhere” (never in one place) in the city. “They’re on my fucking Facebook, for fuck’s sake!” Daniel joked. “And it’s serious beef too – like gang shit. People go on the Internet, and are like, ‘Kay see this person, this is what he looks like. This guy belongs to this gang, this guy belongs to –.’ People are like, ‘Okay I’ll remember that face.’ ‘I’ll bring him to you.’ It’s like, thanks, social media.”

Finally, young women in particular reflected that although enduring emotional attachments and caring relationships were possible on the streets, these relationships were highly precarious due to the realities of street life, where people could often disappear for several days at a time whether as a result of incarceration, a period of drug use binging (which often occurred on or in the days immediately following Welfare Wednesdays15), or the need to lay low and hide from someone as a result of drug debts or other altercations. When I interviewed Rayna’s best friend Marcy in 2008, she initially spoke of the same sense of community and community responsibility that Rayna had articulated. Later in the same conversation, however, she reflected on the instability of social networks, lack of social support and extreme violence that ultimately detracted from positive experiences of community on the streets.

15 The last Wednesday of every month is when welfare recipients receive their monthly cheques in British Columbia.
“I don’t know about community actually,” Marcy said quietly, checking her watch again to see whether our interview was nearly concluded. “Most people are out for themselves. But I have four real friends. One is my late son’s father, who has been my ultimate best friend in the whole wide world. He seems to have flailed off yesterday [as a result of a crack cocaine binge], like I failed him somehow? And he hasn’t returned to me. It's not like him, so I’m worried. That’s another reason why I was really upset when I came in here. Our son died, he didn’t meet our son while he was alive. He’s only 0.1% able to have kids and that 0.1% was with me, his best friend. That’s love,” she emphasized, smiling. “Before I had my son, he'd ride his bike twice a day all the way up to the Oak Street hospital [in a neighbourhood to the south of the downtown core]. Sit outside, call me down for a smoke, and I'd go out and visit him. But then after I gave birth, he wouldn't come in and meet the baby because I was raped right around the same time as he and I were together [so he thought the child might not be his]. I also have a two month old daughter that was taken from me, and I have to go to court for. And I wasn't there April 7th because I passed out and nobody woke me up so I didn't get to court. They just left me there passed out, even though people knew what was happening that day.”

**Everyday violence**

Stories about extreme violence were the most frequent response to my questions about community. “You can get, like, the fucking living shit kicked out of
you,” Laura said, “like, even over 20 dollars, you could just get throttled, right? The first time I had a debt it was like 25 bucks, right? I was walking home at night, and I see this black van. I’m like, shit. And I heard it park. I heard the door open. Turned around and there were these three girls, coming at me, and one of them had a baseball bat. Just crazy, over like 25 dollars. And now I know that’s a pretty common thing like, anywhere you go in the drug scene. On Hastings and shit, you’d get killed. I’ve seen people get, like, stabbed over ten dollars. All I could do was protect my face and wait for it to be over.”

The social suffering synonymous with drug scene entrenchment in Vancouver was the antitheses of community for the majority of youth who participated in this project. In many moments, young people expressed an adamantly individualist and self-reliant perspective. “Straight up, when it comes down to it: I will save my own ass,” Janet stated, during the same conversation as she described advocating for other youth who were being forcibly removed from the downtown core as part of the pre-Olympics clean up effort. “I don’t give a fuck about anybody anymore down here. Like I’ve had friends of mine – I’ve been piped in the head recently over fucking bullshit. Everyone is selfish, you know? Even my boyfriend, I mean, he and I are very close. But I still can’t trust him on lots of issues. Everyone fends for themselves. Dog-eat-dog world.”
Again and again, youth stressed that there was “no such thing” as community on the streets. The stories they told me downplayed instances of camaraderie and generosity on the streets (which I did observe on a regular basis). Instead, young people emphasized the role played by addiction in the context of deprivation – in which the need to procure money and drugs in order to remedy “dopesickness” [withdrawal] could outweigh all other considerations – as well as pervasive violence or the pervasive threat of violence – in completely undermining the conditions necessary for community. Youth acknowledged that they were almost always both the victims and perpetrators of this violence. As Brody explained to me during our first interview, “Community is impossible down here. Like it’s not even an option. I’ve gotten beat up, I’ve gotten robbed, I’ve been taken for everything. And I’ve done those things, I’ll admit it. There’s no such thing as friends in this city. There’s no such thing as having friendship in the drug world, cause sooner or later you’re gonna be dopesick enough to fuck your friend over. I don’t care who the fuck you are. You know what I mean, if I get dopesick? I’m gonna take from you, and if you don’t give it to me, I’m gonna take it harder. So. Can you trust people not to kill you? Maybe, right? But that’s about it. This is what our life is like everyday.”

I witnessed many interactions and exchanges in the field indicative of friendship and social support. However, youth clearly wanted to tell me that the everyday lived experience of drug scene entrenchment in Vancouver made community impossible in this setting – that this was a place in which many had
experienced the death of one or more of their peers, and in which getting stabbed for a toke (inhalation on a crack pipe) or pushed out a window as a result of altercations was relatively commonplace, regardless of whether this understanding reflects the statistics on neighbourhood violence or not.

“I've done bad things, I've also done good things. I've saved people's lives, I've lost people's lives,” Mickey reflected. “I try to do the positive thing, always. Like, I'm not going to let some guy who's in his sixties get beat down by someone in his twenties over something so stupid as cash in the Downtown Eastside. I've intervened in lots of stuff like that. But I've broken into people’s shit, taken their stuff, done drugs the harsh way. Suffered through so much. It's difficult for me to have friends, to watch them die. I've had so many friends die in the last two, three years. Different reasons. Some are murders, some are suicides, some drug use. Some just because it got too cold. Some just because people don't care. Some weird, ironic twists of fate. Some natural causes.”

Again, these statements were more performative than literal retellings of past events. It is not the case that dozens of youth in downtown Vancouver died in a single month, or that kids are routinely getting murdered in this setting – although it does happen. At least since the mid-1990s, alarming numbers of women – many of whom were involved in street-based drug use and sex work – began “disappearing” from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, and are presumed dead at the hands of
serial killer Robert Pickton. The collective memory of these events was a source of trauma for young people (even though most were not street-entrenched during the period of time when Pickton was active in the neighbourhood). Fantastical accounts of violence were rooted in very real anxieties about safety connected to place (Gordillo 2004).

Although many youth felt strongly about the idea that there was “no such thing as community in the drug world,” some expressed nostalgia for an imagined past in which people had “known the value of community” on the streets (Casey 1987; Stewart 1988; Gowan 2000). Others were eager to emphasize periods of time prior to having become street-entrenched, or even brief moments when they had temporarily transcended drug scene involvement, when they were capable of community. “I don’t even know how it’s done anymore,” Carla said vaguely as we were leaving the ARYS office after our first, extremely brief interview together. She was 16, and had been released from the hospital only a few days earlier after being sexually assaulted by one of her “dates” (sex work clients). She was headed to a women only drop-in center in the Downtown Eastside, and I had offered to accompany her instead of doing an office-based interview. Before I turned off the recorder she said, “You know, I’m just fed up with the dope. It’s fucking me over and ruining my life. Like so much. I wish we had had that – helping each other, and like, I dunno, last week I was on the bus and I saw this little boy with his grandpa, and I don’t see my grandpa, you know? I gave him a free coupon for burger at Burger
King and a soft drink, and this little toy keychain. I felt so good inside. But that was before I had used. Cause I just got out of detox last Sunday.”

“Where do you think community really is?” I asked her.

“Churches,” she replied quickly.

These narratives about the possibility of community again reflect the power of neoliberal discourse around choice and responsibility (Moore 2008) – the choice to go to detox and to stay clean, for example. But they also beli assumptions that neoliberal governance is everywhere creating romantic, individualist visions of the self (Mains 2007). While young people did emphasize the individualism that is a part of street life, their narratives equally reflected a longing for meaningful and enduring relationships with others. In many moments, developing these kinds of relationships on the streets seemed impossible to youth. Young people’s stories about the non-existence and impossibility of community sometimes went so far as to connect this “failure” with a lack of basic humanity.

“Most of the youth down here, are here because they want to get high,” Carla said flatly, putting on her jacket and preparing to leave. “They’re not here just because they want a friend. So it’s hard to make a friend, if people aren’t – you know, like, they’re not even people, really? Like, they’re not people, they’re drug users.”
Conclusion

Conventional notions of a community (i.e., a social grouping characterized by commonality, mutual responsibility, solidarity and stability) did resonate with young people as they attempted to make sense of their place in the city. In some moments, youth articulated a strong sense of community on the streets – they did outreach work, picked up discarded needles and advocated for a right to the city among the urban poor (Harvey 2003; Mitchell 2003). For these youth, a close connection with the downtown Vancouver social service infrastructure could form the basis for a sense of community responsibility and meaningful belonging. Alternatively, dependence on this infrastructure precluded the kinds of “normal” forms of belonging in the city youth so greatly desired. As I elaborate further in Chapter 5, for a number of youth stable membership in the drug user community meant shared social spatial destinies, which included “getting lost in the city” to drug addiction, incarceration, violence and even death. For this reason, many youth attempted to distance and dis-identify themselves from that community in the context of this research (Lucchini 1996).

It is important to acknowledge that the commonality implied by community does not have to imply cohesion and social support. Indeed, the utopian community has perhaps always been a symbolic and abstract representation of a much messier reality. Young people’s narratives illustrate that fragmentation and conflict themselves constitute powerful and shared organizing symbols in the day-to-day
lives of young people. Additionally, community may not be an integrating mechanism as much as an aggregating device; that is, a whole formed by combining several (often disparate) elements through a shared connection place (Cohen 1985; Gigengack 2000). If we are to speak of a community of street youth in the Downtown South, for example, it would encompass both Twinkies and those who have grown up on the streets – as well as everyone in between. These boundaries are symbolically complex, and it could be argued that the hallmark of community membership is a shared understanding of these symbols and the ways in which they order everyday life (Cohen 1985; Thornton 1996).

However, the language of community often seemed to obscure the multiple and contradictory ways in which young people envisioned and attempted to enact belonging and sense of place in Vancouver, as well as the violent features of social networks (Hannerz 1992; Tait 1993; Waterson 1993; Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003; Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004). On the streets, peer relationships and allegiances were complex and informed by power relations – including those of gender. Young people navigated a constant tension between collective subjectivities and the individualism demanded by addiction in the context of material deprivation (Hengst 1997; Hecht 1998; Beazley 2003; Bourgois, Prince et al. 2004). Among the youth who participated in this research, there were shared moral codes and everyone knew everyone, but that was not always envisioned positively. Social networks were used to demand social justice, but they were also used everyday to
track people down for violent punishments related to drug debts or altercations within romantic relationships (Beazley 2002; Radcliffe and Stevens 2008).

Community can and does occur in circumstances of everyday violence, and community can give meaningful expression to experiences of marginalization (Gigengack 2000; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). What my findings contradict are romanticized depictions of community on the streets that overemphasize young people’s “resilience” and collective coping strategies in spite of social suffering (Stablein 2011). For most youth, the social suffering synonymous with drug scene entrenchment was the antitheses of community. A number argued that drug users were not capable of community. Young people’s insistence on the non-existence of community in the context of Vancouver’s street-based drug scene may reflect both a mechanism of and response to symbolic violence, however. Youth internalized their marginality and ultimately blamed themselves for their inability to be “responsible” community members – for failing to stay clean after getting out of detox, or for initiating newcomer youth into more harmful drug use practices (Moore and Fraser 2006). However, by rejecting the idea of a drug user community – and/or by imagining moments when “real” community was possible for them or “people like them” – some youth perhaps also reinforced the potential for change in their social position, and created space for alternative social spatial destinies in the city (Shoveller, Johnson et al. 2007).
Figure 4 *Untitled*
Figure 5 *Untitled*
Figure 6 Untitled
Figure 8 *Untitled*
Figure 9 *Untitled*
Chapter 5

Senses of Place

Walking tour

It looked like it was going to rain as I waited for Jordan outside the entrance to his SRO in the Downtown Eastside in 2012. Jordan was 18 when he first arrived in Vancouver from Ontario in 2002. He and I met in 2008, when he was 24 years old. Jordan rarely invited me into his building, which he referred to as a “shit hole.” The SRO where he had been living for the past year was non-descript and had an anonymous feel – you might not notice the entrance unless you knew it was there. The reception area where guests had to be signed in and out by a building attendant was not visible from the street. On either side of the hotel entrance, there were now a couple of fashionable café bars. Inside, a half dozen smartly dressed young people had their Mac laptops open in front of them. An older man with a disheveled appearance and non-coherent speech was sitting in his wheelchair in front of one of the café entrances, shaking an empty MacDonald’s coffee cup at people. Those who walked by largely ignored his requests for change. The sight of the homeless and mentally ill were taken for granted in this part of the city.
The area where Jordan lived was changing rapidly, however. In addition to the new café bars, across the street an older building had recently been knocked down. An advertisement for new condos was tacked up on the temporary yellow fencing around the construction site. The new unit was called “The Flats,” a reference to a sort of trendy internationalism that perhaps particularly resonated with those who had spent time living and travelling abroad. The photograph that accompanied the text was of an interracial couple holding hands and smiling as they walked through the neighbourhood. It celebrated the kind of multiculturalism and eclecticism that the revitalized Downtown Eastside neighbourhood – and the city of Vancouver itself – was meant to embody.

Jordan dreamt of getting a “real” place in the Downtown South – “a nice little bachelor apartment close to the ocean” was how he once put it. To get an apartment in the Downtown South, Jordan first had to get a “real,” nine-to-five job. In one of the most expensive housing markets in the world, his monthly welfare cheques would be inadequate to cover the monthly rent plus an initial damage deposit. “I’ve never actually, to this day, ever had a real job,” Jordan had admitted to me on a previous occasion. “Well, I’ve had one actual job – at The Old Spaghetti Factory [chain restaurant] in Calgary, Alberta. I worked there for three and a half months. Fuck, that was the greatest time of my life.” Jordan hitchhiked across Canada when he was eighteen; Calgary was his last stop before Vancouver. Once in Vancouver, his addiction to heroin “completely took over,” and he had been unable to secure work
since. “I didn’t realize that there was a drug scene like this out here,” he sighed.

“Nobody explained it to me. They told me it was a wild place, it was gonna be fun. But it was also a crazy place. Nobody ever tells you about craziness of the place. Nobody ever takes that extra time to say, no, this is what you’re getting into. This is where you’re going” (Fast, Small et al. 2009).

When Jordan finally emerged from his hotel that day, he informed me that there was a community garden in Strathcona he wanted to show me. This represented a departure from our usual itineraries. We rarely strayed more than a few blocks from his hotel and the handful of other places in the Downtown Eastside he went to on a daily basis. As we walked east toward the garden, Jordan told me that he was several days clean off opiates. He had been enrolled in a heroin maintenance trial but decided to quit, even though rumor had it that the waiting list for the trial was hundreds of people long. “I was one of the first people they asked to be in it,” I remembered him saying several months before, sounding pleased.

Jordan was well known in the Downtown Eastside. Walking that day we exchanged greetings with nearly everyone we saw, Jordan stopping to make introductions when he felt like it. For several years he had been directly involved in the politics of place that surrounds the Downtown Eastside (Blomley 2004; Ley and Dobson 2008). This politics takes various forms, including innovative harm reduction initiatives like heroin maintenance trials and a supervised injection
facility, yearly marches to remember the neighbourhood’s missing and murdered women, and homeless squats to protest gentrification – all of which Jordan had participated in. He had even appeared in a documentary about Insite. He had often bragged about that fact in the past, but as we approached the entrance to the community garden that day, Jordan told me that he was now furious about the outcome of his participation in the documentary. “They used footage of me and put my name under it and everything without my permission,” he said angrily, vigorously smoking his cigarette. “They outed me as a drug addict to all of my family. My family saw it. They didn’t know I was using.” I had asked him why he had decided to leave the heroin maintenance trial. In his mind, the two were related. “I don’t want to be a drug addict,” he said flatly, as if that should be obvious. “I didn’t like the fact that [the people who ran the trial] were just giving us dope, and I didn’t like the fact that they had to watch our every fucking move every fucking minute we were in there.” He emphasized, “I care what society sees me as. I care about how people see me. I don’t go to food lines, I don’t go to shit like that. I eat at home. I buy my own food at a regular store. I actually really only go to Insite just to say hi to people. I know all the staff there,” he quickly added, smiling. He looked at me, possibly assessing whether I was taking his statements seriously. We both knew that this defiant rejection of services for the urban poor was more wishful thinking than something that could be enacted in reality.
Jordan continued, “I don’t want to be labeled as that. As a junkie down here who’s going nowhere. I can’t handle the fact that, someday, somebody might say to my daughter, ‘Hey your dad was down here shooting up, blah, blah, blah.’ ‘Your dad’s a junkie.’ You know, say I’m walking through the mall with my daughter, trying to buy her a birthday present, her first outfit for school –” he trailed off.

Jordan seemed to be imagining what it would be like to do something like that – to go to a mall without being asked to leave by security, to have the extra money to buy gifts for his daughter, or to have a relationship with one of his daughters at all. Jordan had three daughters with three different young women, and the youngest was nearly three years old. “You know what I’m saying?” he continued finally. “And then to have her hear, ‘Hey, your daddy’s a junkie’ from someone who saw me down here?” He shook his head with disgust.

Walking through the community garden, Jordan decided to change the subject. He talked about how much he loved “normal stuff” like flowers, gardening and “being in nature.” We wound our way along a wood chip pathway through neatly divided plots. Jordan greeted and attempted to strike up a conversation with the few people we saw who had decided to brave the weather and work on their garden plots. He snapped some photographs with my camera. These would be a stark contrast to the other images he had taken in the weeks prior, which focused on the most degraded features of urban space – the run down alleyways, concrete alcoves and empty lots where he had slept and used drugs before getting a room in an SRO.
– and details like discarded syringes and human feces. The world he captured on camera was polarized between beauty and filth. Jordan later articulated that his photo essay was about what is visible on the surface of an internationally celebrated city like Vancouver, and what is hidden from public view and only visible to “people like him” (Figures 10, 11, 12, 13, 14). Through his photo essay, however, Jordan positioned himself as a part of both of these landscapes.

“I haven’t always been like this – I’ve spent a year clean here, too. And I loved it,” Jordan emphasized that day in the garden. “I love Vancouver. There’s so much to see and do here.” He picked up a discarded syringe out of the foliage and held onto it for proper disposal. We emerged from the community garden onto an open lot. It used to be a homeless camp but was now vacant and scattered with idle bulldozers, in the process of being re-developed into some kind of training facility, one of the bulldozer operators informed us. The elevated tracks of the SkyTrain line loomed overhead in the distance. Jordan attempted to get a few photographs of the open lot with a passing train in the background. A man in a dirty sports jersey and jeans darted out of a narrow path along a chain link fence to our right, and ran past us. We walked along the same path littered with old beer bottles, take-out containers and other garbage, and came out on the other side where a recycling depot is located. There were several older binners out front, unloading carts full of used cans and bottles. This was not a future Jordan imagined for himself.
“I’m a college boy,” he said confidently as we walked away from the recycling depot. “I studied culinary arts. Computer sciences and shit like that – I loved it.” Jordan had been incarcerated for most of his youth and had completed some college-level courses in prison. “Yeah, I’m a quarterback,” he boasted, “I was one of the best in Kingston when I was a kid. I played hockey when I was younger too. I played for the farm team for [the Ontario Hockey League]. I was a good athlete. I’m still a good athlete. I still roller blade all summer long.” He looked at me again, perhaps wondering if I was going to explicitly question this dramatic re-framing of the facts of his childhood and sense of place in Vancouver. Jordan had been severely abused as a child, and was incarcerated and institutionalized for most of his youth for committing manslaughter against one of the perpetrators of that abuse. His descriptions of rollerblading all summer long and playing on sports teams as a child diverged significantly from his frequent lamentations about the fact that he was “going nowhere” in the Downtown Eastside, and had “never so much as been taken to a baseball game” as a kid.

“I pretty much sit at home,” Jordan had said dejectedly on more than one occasion, most recently in response to a comment I made that he seemed to take the same photographs over and over again. My well-meaning inquiries about why he did not take pictures of other areas in the city had eventually forced him into a shameful confession. “I don’t leave this area,” he admitted, cringing. “I think I’m too chicken shit to do it. I haven’t left downtown. I’m afraid to get lost.” From that point
on, Jordan did take more photographs of parts of the city that were foreign to him, albeit from his vantage point in downtown Vancouver (Figure 15).

“I came out here for the surf, and for the chicks,” Jordan reminisced, as we walked back towards his SRO. “I wanted to go to Wreck Beach out by UBC [the University of British Columbia]. That’s one place I would like to go. But, yeah,” he sighed, “I want to get my life together. I want to go to university. I never went to a real school. I wish I could’ve. I’d like to do what you do honestly – teach people about health and stuff. I get really intimidated when I’m around normal crowds though,” he said nervously, lighting another cigarette. “Like, in a way I find you really intimidating. Just the little things you say – like how expensive this camera is.” He adjusted the strap I always insisted he keep around his neck so that there would be no chance of him dropping my camera, and looked away.

A few months after Jordan and I had gone for that walk through the community garden, I ran into him on the street. He had his hood pulled up and dark sunglasses on, even though the sky was grey. He admitted that he had relapsed on heroin and was back in the clinical trial. Over the four years I had known him, Jordan had relapsed numerous times. When he was clean, he wanted to believe that he would never again be drawn back into the humiliating routines of drug use and destitution that seemed to “trap” him in the Downtown Eastside – going three times a day to the clinic where the trial was being held, waiting in food line ups because
he had spent all of his money on additional drugs, and making daily trips to Insite to pick up harm reduction supplies (Radcliffe and Stevens 2008). After he had relapsed he usually commented to me that this was inevitable so long as he was living in an SRO in the Downtown Eastside. That was “just the way things were” for people who “ended up” down there.

That day I ran into him, he invited me to come into his building, leading me up a flight of stairs to a shared lounge with two sagging couches and a plastic plant in the corner. Jordan had always insisted he would never use drugs in front of me “out of respect,” but today he seemed too tired to care. “I hate using. I hate drugs,” he said as he unwrapped a syringe. “Drug using isn’t normal. It could be for some people I guess. But you’d never go to Starbucks and sit down and spend a thousand dollars on coffee, in the next six hours.” He gestured at the over-priced specialty coffee in my hand from the café downstairs. “But someone like me might go and spend a grand on heroin.” He paused. “But honestly, I was just so bored. At least down here this is something I’m good at, right? I’m actually really good at all this.” He went quiet, preparing to do his fix. He was clearly in no mood to talk, and had likely only invited me in because I had offered to give him cigarettes. I left Jordan sitting there on the couch, staring out the window at the new condo units going up across the street.
Introduction

There is a growing body of work that focuses on how young people living in the margins of urban space understand, experience and engage with place in their everyday lives (Hecht 1998; Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998; Gigengack 2000; Robinson 2000; Beazley 2002; Rhodes, Watts et al. 2007). This research has illustrated that rather than being somehow placeless, these young people may possess heightened understandings of and attachments to the urban landscape. A focus on how these young people engage with the politics of place in the city has highlighted the geographies of power that limit their uses of urban space, and exclude them from the opportunities these spaces afford (Sibley 1995; Caldeira 2000; Low 2000; Harris 2002; Mitchell 2003; Blomley 2004). But it has also illuminated how young people are active in reconfiguring geographies of exclusion and inclusion, and the categories of public and private space according to their own needs, priorities and desires (Collier and Lakoff 2005; De Boeck and Howanda 2005; Lindegaard 2009). For example, work with street youth in Indonesia has illustrated how state ideological discourse about family values and gender roles has been used to justify “clean up” efforts aimed at forcibly removing young people – and particularly young women – from the streets of Yogyakarta (Beazley 2002). However, this research also illustrates the ways in which these young women use city spaces to circumvent conventional gender norms and carve out relatively safe, “girl-only” spaces in the public parks of the city center. Similarly, previous work from Tanzania
discusses the disjunction between a state-sponsored project of modernization and the presence of hundreds of young men living and working on the streets of Dar es Salaam, resulting in the frequent arrest of these informal entrepreneurs (Lewinson 1998; Moyer 2004). At the same time, this research has shown how young people’s appropriation of urban space in the pursuit of financial gain – for example, their occupation of a parking lot adjacent to an international hotel for the purpose of washing cars – in fact constitutes a spatial tactic aimed at securing a place in the very same modernizing project endorsed by the state (De Certeau 1984). In both examples, young people are marginalized by place, and their exclusion is reflected in the kinds of in-between spaces they occupy. At the same time, these “nowhere places” can become the sites of elaborate regimes of living and multiple subjectivities, from the “street kid” in need of charity and protection, to the young, modern urban citizen (De Certeau 1984; Moyer 2003).

In this chapter, I build on this previous work, by exploring how a group of youth entrenched in an inner city drug scene understood, experienced and engaged with the politics of place in Vancouver during a particular historical moment. As I have already begun to demonstrate, young people engaged with these politics in ways that defy easy analysis. Places like Insite and events like a heroin maintenance trial were incorporated into complex regimes of living and shifting processes of subjective experimentation, through which youth positioned themselves as both in- and out-of-place on the streets in specific ways. I highlight parts of that day I spent
with Jordan in 2012, and his subsequent relapse several months later, in order to begin elucidating the wider geographies of power, political economy and possibility that young people navigated as they attempted to negotiate multiple forms of belonging and becoming in the city (Biehl and Locke 2010). For example, on that day in 2012, Jordan vehemently resisted the notion that he was in-place in the Downtown Eastside. He positioned himself as out-of-place on the streets by re-imagining an alternative sense of belonging in the city in relation to “normal places” like grocery stores, shopping malls, a community garden, and Vancouver’s Seawall in the Downtown South. And yet on a number of other occasions, Jordan expressed a strong sense of being in-place and at-home in the Downtown Eastside (Robertson 2007). He loved to brag that he “knew everyone down there,” and was in many moments proud of his advocacy on behalf of “the community” in the documentary about Insite.

Young people’s sense of place in Vancouver was not only bound up with drug-using neighbourhoods like the Downtown Eastside and the Downtown South, however. While these places were powerful organizing symbols in the lives of youth (Feldman 1991; Fast, Shoveller et al. 2009), sense of place was also formed in tension with other kinds of places – as well as various geographical relocations and dislocations – which often transcended the “local” drug scene in space and time (Moore 1998; Raffles 1999; Gordillo 2004). For Jordan, remembered places like the prison where he had been incarcerated for most of his youth (and completed several
college-level courses), and the restaurant where he had worked briefly as a dishwasher – as well as imagined places like the University of British Columbia campus – also shaped the processes of subjective experimentation he was working through (Riaño-Alcalá 2002). Remembered and imagined places allowed Jordan to position himself, in certain moments, as a “college boy” or previously responsible “employee,” capable of belonging in “mainstream society” and therefore unambiguously out-of-place on the streets. In other moments, however, a fear that he would “get lost” in the upper-middle class worlds represented by places like the university was a part of what positioned him as in-place in the Downtown Eastside.

In this chapter, I explore how the contradictions embedded in the urban landscape could be embodied by youth as symbolic violence (Soja 1989). Over time, a sense of belonging or being in-place on the streets (in spite of youth’s efforts to position themselves as out-of-place in “junkie” spaces) shaped ways of being at the most intimate level, including seemingly “inevitable” relapses back into “risky” drug use practices. However, I also describe how these contradictions reflected youth’s desires to break open alternative horizons of possibility, belonging and becoming in the city. Among youth, involvement in the drug scene could be articulated as both a fragile sense of being in-place and at-home in one of “the best places on earth,” and a sense of “getting lost in the city.”
Living in the best place on earth

In the previous chapter, I began to describe young people’s desires for what many referred to as a “normal life” in Vancouver. One form of belonging youth were attempting to work through on the streets was a sense of home in what many believed really was one of “The Best Places on Earth” – a slogan that for a time appeared on license plates and other government advertising for the Province of British Columbia. Most of the youth I knew came to Vancouver from other places – other neighbourhoods, cities, towns, and reserves. In relation to these places, the city of Vancouver was frequently framed as the site of new and exciting opportunities for work, leisure and home-making.

“On the Rez, it’s really poor, financially and stuff like that,” Lee explained in 2008. I had asked him if he ever considered returning to the reserve in Northern Alberta where he was born. Lee alternated between criticizing the place where he was from, and idealizing the “traditional ways of life” and sense of being “close to nature” he imagined experiencing there as a child (his actual memories of the Rez seemed quite blurred, which is not surprising perhaps, given that he was forcibly removed from his family home by the government when he was only four or five years old). “Here, you have so many different kinds of people, going to work, going shopping, doing this and that, you know what I mean? There’s so much to do here, different ways to progress yourself. Back home [on the Rez] people just sit around, and stay in their house, cause it’s just like, there are no stores, there’s nothing to do
there. All you gotta do is raise up your kids. Grow old and be there. There’s no work
there, really. I don’t see myself ever going back – backwards – yeah. In Vancouver,
though, eventually you’ll have a good job,” Lee imagined. “You’re there for two and
a half years or whatever, and then your salary goes up. That’s what I’d like to see for
myself in two years. Doing that. Going to work, having a family.”

Lee became increasingly animated as he filled in the details. “Get up, take a
shower. Then take a lunch break or whatever, come back home, all those kinda
things, right? Do your laundry. You’ll come home from work and feel like you did a
really good job. You’re happy because you’ve got that pay cheque every two weeks
in a bank account, or whatever it is. Just the normality of life, right? And have a
house, I would love to just have my own house, right, do you know what I mean?
And have a dog, or cat, or both or something, right? One or two kids or something,
you know what I’m saying? And do things for your children, just to be able to say,
‘Let’s go do this,’ ‘Let’s go do that.’ Cause I never really had that, you know? Go
camping or something. Or go skiing if you wanted, or go skating, you know what I
mean? I’d like to be able to say, ‘Well, let’s go do whatever,’ you know? The
easygoingness of just being able to pick up the phone and order a pizza, or
something. I want to do that eventually, when I get my own job and stuff, right? I
wanna have – I wanna have –”
“A white picket fence life?” I finally interrupted, laughing. This was a phrase I had heard several youth use when describing the lives they imagined other people had. “You know that saying? Where you have the perfect family home and it has a white fence around it?”

“Yes,” Lee answered matter-of-factly, “I want that. Here. I just want to get ahead in life, you know? I’m looking for work right now – restaurant work, landscaping. Those are things I like to do. But right now there’s nothing.”

Once in Vancouver, young people found themselves inhabiting the social, spatial and economic margins of the city, in ways that often mirrored the exclusions they had experienced in the places of their childhoods (MacDonald and Marsh 2002). However, the city of Vancouver itself was not marginal (Roitman 2005). Youth were eager to call Vancouver home for the same reasons “normal” people were – they wanted to live near the mountains and the ocean, and enjoy the excitement of big city life (Mains 2007). In many ways, young people articulated those urban narratives inhabited by us all in the city of Vancouver (albeit from varying positions and postal codes; Robertson 2006). Tom described his first impressions of Vancouver to me during a second interview we did in 2008, when he was still sleeping under the overhang in front of the ARYS office. He was originally from Yellowknife and had hitchhiked all over Canada before arriving in Vancouver. “It was awesome! Like all the lights on Granville Street [in the Downtown South]? It felt like I was in Vegas.
Well – I’ve never been to Vegas before, right?” he admitted. “But, I don’t know – it’s how I imagine it – from TV and stuff. It’s just awesome out here.”

For the most part, youth envisioned their involvement in the drug scene as temporary. The possibilities of place they imagined for themselves in the city included living in a nice apartment and owning a car, engaging in leisure activities in the evenings and on the weekends, travelling abroad, and raising a family. Youth saw themselves eventually having meaningful careers and well-paying jobs. In other words, their dreams were similar to those of many middle-upper class Canadians, regardless of experiences of growing up poor (Sterk 1999; Mains 2007; Garrett, Higa et al. 2008). On the streets of Vancouver, youth asserted their inclusion in these dreams largely by distancing themselves from “junkie” spaces and neighbourhoods, and, as described in the previous chapter, stable membership in “the community” (Ruddick 1996). Jordan defiantly rejected the supervised injection site and food line-ups in the Downtown Eastside, as well as his much-coveted place in the heroin maintenance trial – albeit only during those periods of time when he was able to stay clean. At various moments, youth expressed a refusal to enter the Downtown Eastside, even if this meant foregoing much needed services. As described in Chapter 4, a number of youth attempted to align themselves with “normal” forms of belonging and becoming in the city by inhabiting the Downtown South, even if it was only by choosing to remain homeless in the neighbourhood rather than accept housing in more marginal parts of Greater Vancouver (most notably, the outer
suburbs and the Downtown Eastside). “Staying put” in the Downtown South could also be an explicitly political project. “Housing in this city needs to be cheaper. Or welfare needs to be more. Simple,” Laura said angrily. She, Nick and I were sitting on a park bench in the Downtown South. By this time, Laura was nearly seven months pregnant. “Like, [low monthly welfare payments are a] great way to get us out of the city, to move to, like, Coquitlam or Surrey – or herded down there with all the junkies.” She gestured vaguely in the direction of the Downtown Eastside. “But like, no. I want some place that is nice. And, like, actually I’ll say one thing right now, I’m not going to live anywhere else but here [in the Downtown South]. I won’t accept anything less.”

“It’s a choice, basically,” Laura insisted after a while, perhaps as much to herself as to me. “You choose to, you know, be around this area, where normal people are, too? You know, where people who live in society are. Or you choose to go down there and be fucked up for the rest of your life. So, yeah, until I get into the situation where I can afford to like, live in an apartment here [in the Downtown South] I’m not leaving. It’s not going to happen. Sorry. Like, this is our home.”

**Home-making in the city**

For youth like Lee who grew up cycling in and out of government care, the mobility and transience that had characterized much of their lives did not necessarily preclude an attachment to place. In many cases, these experiences of
living “everywhere” and “nowhere” as children seemed to be pivotal in forming a strong attachment to the idea of home in the city (Gordillo 2004). “You know, I’m a kid from, uh, pretty much everywhere, right? Or a kid from nowhere, I guess you could say,” Raymond remarked thoughtfully in 2011. He and his sister were giving me a tour of the apartment they shared in East Vancouver (and from which the two of them sold crack cocaine). Raymond was 20 years old when I first interviewed him in 2008, and I would be continually amazed by the vulnerability he expressed during our interviews, particularly given his street reputation for brutal violence and the length of his criminal record. “So I tend to try to make my place like, a home, wherever I am,” he continued, opening and closing every cupboard and drawer in the kitchen so that I could see its contents. Since his sister was also with us, Raymond made sure I knew that it was him who had organized the kitchen, acquired the mismatched pieces of furniture, and added personal touches like the well-worn photographs on the fridge and handmade quilt he had used to cover the couch. In the same closet where he kept a number of cans of bear spray (the weapon of choice among both young women and men on the streets while I was conducting fieldwork) there was a vacuum cleaner, which Raymond told me he had actually purchased from a second hand store instead of just stealing it during a robbery. “I like to have all of that around me, right? Like a family atmosphere kind of thing,” he imagined.
Among many of the young women I knew, a sense of being at-home and in-place in the city was inseparable from the romantic relationships they cultivated on the streets. The first time I met her in 2008, I asked Laura where she considered home to be. “With my boyfriend,” she answered immediately, gesturing to Nick. But young women were not the only ones whose sense of place was linked to traditional visions of domesticity, parenthood and romantic love. These were of high symbolic value to both young women and men as they attempted to make a place for themselves in Vancouver (Bourgois, Prince et al. 2004; Moloney, MacKenzie et al. 2009). Before Nick had become homeless on the most recent occasion (and subsequently gotten together with Laura), he had for a time been in a committed relationship with the mother of his first child. He recalled the apartment where the three of them had lived in Burnaby, and how, after a year of “keeping it together,” his escalating crack cocaine use resulted in the loss of the job and apartment he had worked so hard to get, as well as the end of his relationship and removal of his child from his custody. On those rare instances when I would see him without Laura, he reflected angrily on his current circumstances and how they represented a radical departure from the “real” home he had been able to create with his previous girlfriend.

“Hey man, I was a normal person, and then I lost my kid and starting coming down here again,” he said sharply, in response to my question about where he had been living previously. “Yo, I know normal people with expensive houses, with cars
and gold. I know all kinds of people. I’m mostly not a drug-related person. I haven't always been this – slackin off, or whatever. I’ve worked. I’ve provided for my family. You know what I mean? I've worked at Jiffy Lube [mechanics]. I’ve worked at Red Robins [restaurant], Macaroni Grill [restaurant], whatever else. My closest friends have kids and work all the time. I’m not a crackhead like those people in the Eastside – well I’ve never hung out on the streets when I smoked crack,” he added. “The whole reason I’m here and fucking up with drugs is because my girlfriend broke up with me and took my kid away.”

It was hard to watch Nick take out his frustrations on his current girlfriend Laura, whom he frequently accused of cheating on him. He had told me on more than one occasion that he did not believe the baby she was carrying was his because they were “on a break” around the time that she got pregnant. Laura accepted this abuse, I suspect because Nick and the baby were an integral part of the home-making project she longed for in Vancouver. While she felt at-home and in-place in the city as long as the two of them were together, Nick’s visions of meaningful belonging and becoming were inextricably linked to having a “real” place and a “real” job so that he could provide for his family.

**Getting lost**

Youth struggled to reconcile their obvious exclusion in the city with a desire to understand themselves as a part of it, in ways that often revolved around visions of
“home” and a “normal life.” Particularly as time passed, and youth became increasingly entrenched in material deprivation, homelessness, addictions and/or crime, they articulated a sense that they were somehow “getting lost in the city.” A fear of getting lost in Vancouver was not only generated by an unfamiliarity with the physical geography of the city beyond its drug-using neighbourhoods – which Jordan admitted to on the occasion when I urged him to take pictures of other places. It was also generated by the everyday violence of various kinds of “disappearances” on the streets. As I began to describe in the previous chapter, there were several ways young people could disappear for periods of time, including incarceration, a period of drug use binging, and the need to lay low and hide from someone. Youth were also hospitalized for infections, overdoses and mental breakdowns (Werb 2008; Hadland, Marshall et al. 2011). They could go “missing,” as had been the case with the large number of women who vanished from the Downtown Eastside in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Opal 2012). During my fieldwork, stories also circulated about youth who had been pushed out of SRO windows to their deaths, and gangs that disposed of bodies with both hands cut off so that police could not identify them. All of the youth who participated in this project knew at least one person who had committed suicide or overdosed on drugs (and these were not always understood by young people as two distinct events; Garcia 2010). Several youth confided to me that they had attempted suicide in the past.
“It’s a lot more dangerous here than I thought it was,” Patty told me. She and her longtime boyfriend Joe lived in an SRO on the edge of the Downtown Eastside in Gastown. In 2012, I saw the two of them often when Patty was suddenly hospitalized for seven weeks due to a life threatening injection-related infection (which her doctor told her was “one hundred percent caused by her crystal meth use”). “There might not be as many murders here as in Edmonton [as a result of the gang violence in this adjacent Canadian city], but there’s a lot more” – she searched for the word – “statistics? Here. You come here and anybody can do drugs in those SRO rooms and they could just overdose, you know, like, the supplies are all there [in the Downtown Eastside], it’s so easy, and you can go into your room and do your drugs and it – you could do too much heroin or something and not have the door open and overdose and two days later they could find your body. Or you could die in the hospital or something and nobody would ever hear from you again. I’ve had, um, endocarditis, I’ve had myositis, I’ve had cellulitis, I’ve had septic arthritis. I have Hep C. Or just – ” she trailed off. “You never know. Yeah.” Then she added, “It’s hard to live a regular life here. It’s one extreme or the other. There’s not much work here at all.”

“There’s a lot more informal work here though, hey?” Joe responded.

“Everybody here drug deals and stuff – they’re all like, ‘Oh I got to go to work.’ ‘For the boss,’” he laughed.
“But one minute it is – there’s people that are like ‘big time’ and then the next minute they’re thrown in jail,” Patty said. “And there’s somebody else who takes over right away, so.”

“Like you get your fifteen minutes of – of fame. But then we can get lost after,” Joe said softly. “You could die. Someone else takes your spot. Go crazy. Get clean,” he added hopefully.

“There’s lots of services here, though,” Patty acknowledged. “That’s pretty much what takes up all our time. Except the weekends. I can’t stand weekends.”

“That’s interesting,” I replied. “Cause that’s sort of the opposite of what you would say if –”

“– if you worked,” she interrupted, laughing. “If you had a regular life here. But for people like us we usually can’t stand the weekends. You can’t get anything done because everything is closed.”

**Embodied marginality**

For youth, the *inevitability* of being “lost” to self-destructive and out-of-control addictions, infections like HIV, and/or violence was powerfully embedded in the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood (Fast, Shoveller et al. 2009). The connection young people made between the Downtown Eastside and “getting lost in the city” was often highly gendered. Both young women *and* men emphasized the dangers of
the neighbourhood *for women*, and in particular those who became involved in sex work and drug use. These understandings were shaped by the tremendous harms, violence and exploitation young people had themselves experienced and/or witnessed in the Downtown Eastside. They were also likely shaped, at least in part, by the crisis of missing and murdered women in the Downtown Eastside, and the significant public debate generated by the British Columbia Missing Women Commission of Inquiry (which began in 2010). Briefly, the Inquiry underscored the magnitude of police misconduct in response to the large number of women reported missing from the neighbourhood – namely, that reports of missing women had not been taken seriously by police because of the “kinds” of women involved (i.e., women who were street-involved and/or engaged in sex work and drug use), leading to a large number of additional and likely preventable deaths (Opal 2012). A number of the youth who participated in this research identified with the idea that women who “end up” in the Downtown Eastside have been “forsaken” by society (to use the language of the 2012 report that resulted from the Inquiry), and *allowed* to disappear from the city – whether at the hands of a serial killer, pimp, or violent drug dealer/boyfriend.

The matter-of-fact tone Rayna usually took when we spoke was difficult to stomach as she described her “inevitable demise” in the Downtown Eastside, and admitted to me that she was HIV-positive during a second in-depth interview I did with her in 2009. She was 19 years old. “My parents grew up down here. They’re
pretty well known in the Downtown Eastside, and they’re drug addicts so therefore I watched my parents do it all my life and I started doing drugs when I was like 10 years old. Whatever. I thought about trying [injecting], and I thought that it was a very bad idea – I knew the risks, right?” She paused before continuing, “It’s a really hard decision to make. When you’re a Downtown Eastsider, either you’re going to be a full on junkie or you’re not going to be. You can still maintain some integrity, but – sometimes that’s the only option you really have, right? Being a junkie and eventually killing yourself. Once you stick a needle in your arm, you keep sticking a needle in your arm because it’s the only thing that makes you feel better. I was in self-destructive mode. I thought, I’m going to eventually get AIDS, and I’m going to eventually die. That’s what it’s like when you live down there. My biggest problem was that I always knew that I was going to go down. So I hit rock bottom. I didn’t have any reason to care, which is why I contracted Hepatitis C, a couple years ago. And just this past little while, from using a dirty needle, I found out that I’m HIV positive. It’s my fault,” Rayna added quickly. “That was my choice. Because I knew damn well – pretty much since I was a little kid – you stick a fucking dirty rig in your arm, it’s your fucking fault if you get HIV.” As described in the previous chapter, Rayna’s close connection with the social service infrastructure in downtown Vancouver “since she was a little kid” was the basis for a sense of community on the streets, and meaningful belonging in society. However, it also reinforced her belief that she should have “known better” than to contract HIV.
Sense of place is an embodied knowledge of the world; it delimits a field of workable possibilities in the locations out of which it is formed (Mitchell 2002). For Rayna and a number of other youth, a sense that they belonged in a marginal place like the Downtown Eastside powerfully shaped how the past was interpreted and revised (‘It’s my fault I got HIV’), what futures were possible to imagine (‘I was always going to go down’), and how the present moment was perceived and acted upon (Ruddick 1998; Robinson 2000). Sense of place and sense of self mutually constituted each other, in a two-way process that ultimately reproduces the social suffering that exists in places like the Downtown Eastside (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Dovey, Fitzgerald et al. 2001; Bourgois and Schonberg 2007; Rhodes, Watts et al. 2007). For Rayna and the other Lost Boys, who tended to understand themselves as unambiguously in-place on streets of the Downtown Eastside, it was particularly difficult to enact or even envision alternative forms of becoming in the city beyond stigmatizing labels like “junkie” or “crackhead.” The social was incorporated into the body, fueling symbolic violence and “risky” regimes of living – such as the addict who is in self-destructive mode and will inevitably “hit rock bottom” (Vitellone 2004; Bourgois and Schonberg 2007).

The possibilities of place

A sense of getting lost in the city reflected the everyday and symbolic violence of drug scene entrenchment, but it could also reflect a sense that youth were
somehow moving further away from the kinds of progress they envisioned for themselves in Vancouver. “It’s a lot different than I wanted it to be, right?”

Raymond reflected sadly in 2012. He had recently been released from prison for armed robbery. Raymond was by this point a reluctant gangster (Pitts 2008); he was highly ambivalent about the benefits of his membership in a Native gang, and longed to live out a dramatically different life in the city – going to church on Sundays, working an “honest” job, taking care of his mom (who was struggling with her own drug use) and staying clean. “Actually thinking about how things are now makes me, you know – I just can’t figure out how I got here,” he sighed.

“I want to progress,” Lee emphasized to me during an interview in 2012. He tried to sound confident, but grew increasingly agitated as he reflected on the fact that he was nowhere near where he thought he would be when we did our first interview together four years earlier. After a while he added hopefully, “There’s these programs, or whatever – I just found out about them. You can become whatever you want I guess, that’s what they said. They’re like, yeah, whatever you want, pretty much, cause there’s so much demand for workers. That’s starting in May, so I have to get my resume ready, get my [government] ID. I still need to get my Indian status card. And I’m trying to get a new place to stay, too, cause I’m just putting up with too much in the [SRO] I’m in now. Last night my door got kicked in for no good reason, just people being crazy. So I need to call the [social housing agency] today.”
Drug scene entrenchment seemed to generate an endless round of “business” to take care of (Preble and Casey 1969; Baron 2001). A great deal of this business was created by the maze of services, agencies and bureaucracies young people navigated on a daily basis. Youth spent large amounts of their time standing in line for food, showers and laundry services; travelling to and from numerous appointments and meetings with social workers, probation officers, doctors, drug and alcohol counselors, housing agencies and researchers; filling out forms in order to get government IDs, better (Disability 2) welfare and better social housing; and moving in and out of shelters and SROs. This infrastructure engendered particular regimes of living, which structured young people’s time in ways that were perhaps preferable to “sitting around” with nothing to do. This was reflected in Patty’s sentiment towards weekends, although young people’s time was equally if not more so structured by the imperative of income generation in the context of material deprivation and addictions, and tumultuous romantic relationships. It was these which created a constant state of preparedness for action on the streets, and gave youth a sense of being in something (Katz 1988; Pitts 2008).

Simultaneously, however, the endless round of business generated by the social service infrastructure and the drama of the scene could create a sense of “going nowhere” in the city. “If you’re homeless, you go to [downtown] Vancouver. That’s all I know,” Nick reflected in 2012, at which time he was no longer with Laura and living in an SRO in the Downtown Eastside. “That’s where all the services are.
Like, Hastings, skid row – they’re spoiled, basically. Well, not ‘they’re’ but we are spoiled. You know what I mean? And that’s why I just don’t see anyone progressing down here, because it’s basically giving them somewhere to come and just eat and sleep and do all this shit for free. Same with jail. I’m so dependent on things down here now and it’s fucking boring as hell.” It might seem that young people led lives so troubled that there was little room for boredom. In fact, boredom was omnipresent on the streets and a commonly employed vocabulary of discontent among youth (Jervis, Spicer et al. 2003; Anderson 2004; Mains 2007; Willging, Quintero et al. 2011; Bengtsson 2012; German and Latkin 2012).

Far more often than young people questioned why I would want to put myself in potentially risky situations in order to do this research, they remarked on how boring it must be for me to hang around with them, “killing time” and waiting for something to happen (Raposa 1999; Taussig 2004; Bengtsson 2012). While previous work on boredom and modernity asserts that boredom is a problem of excess – of having “a lot of nothing” – in the context of drug scene entrenchment boredom seemed to derive from being both under and overwhelmed (Young 1999; Jervis, Spicer et al. 2003; Goodstein 2005). On the streets, time was marked by often elaborate itineraries associated with the procurement of material resources (described in more detail in the following chapter). It was also marked by a painstaking and seemingly endless process of checking off items on various “to-do lists”: apply for government identification, apply for an Indian Status Card, make a
resume, apply for school, apply for training programs, apply for jobs, find a shelter, find housing, get on Disability 2, get a $20 crisis grant, go to court, go to a meeting, go to a food line, etc. As my discussion to this point demonstrates, many of the youth who participated in this research longed instead to structure their time around “normal” work, school and domestic routines. In the absence of meaningful markers of time, youth frequently expressed a sense of boredom on the streets – even in the midst of chaos (Brissett and Snow 1993; Bengtsson 2012).

Re-entering fantasyland

Even when youth did manage to “pull themselves together” – for example, they got clean, moved into more stable housing, and/or went back to school – the structural violence of their entrenched marginalization often persisted. By 2012, the sites of my fieldwork had shifted dramatically. Instead of sitting together in public parks, coffee shops and fast food restaurants, I visited a number of youth in recently acquired apartments and basement suites, and in rare cases the homes of family members with whom they were by that time once again living with. In 2011, Nancy and her new boyfriend moved into a one-bedroom apartment only a few blocks away from the Surrey Central SkyTrain station. As I exited the station on my way to visiting her, I noticed the rows of banners adorning the walkway, proclaiming that “The future lives here” (a slogan adopted by the city of Surrey in order to challenge its reputation for delinquency, and attract new “kinds” of residents and businesses).
“It’s a nice neighbourhood, I guess,” Nancy said vaguely, in response to my question about how her future was shaping up now that she had a “real” place. “I guess it’s as good as anywhere else that’s this close to the SkyTrain. You can get anywhere you want, really quick.” After a while she continued, “Um, but you know what? I don’t do that much, so it’s not like I’m using the SkyTrain anyways. I kinda just stick close to here. Close to my home here.”

For Nancy, the social spatial mobility symbolized by living near the SkyTrain station was largely an illusion. A lack of disposable income and the crippling effects of her eating disorder made pursuing opportunities for work, school, recreation and relaxation beyond the walls of her apartment extremely difficult. She spent most of her days watching TV and reading used university textbooks. “I’ve been trying to study medicine and psychology and, like, forensic stuff on my own,” she explained, gesturing to the pile of books on her coffee table. “I know that’s not what you do, but it’s kind of the same I think?” She laughed nervously, before taking a more serious tone, “I guess my life right now is about trying to figure out what’s wrong with me – with my bulimia and everything.”

Young people’s lived realities – even in the absence of drug use and homelessness – were often hard to face (Sterk 1999). Even as they attempted to place their lives and routines within narratives of progress, many described a troubling sense that they were still somehow “lost in the city.” In 2012, Amanda moved out to
her aunt’s house in the Fraser Valley, and enrolled in a self-paced pre-nursing program at Vancouver Community College. A few months after she moved I went to visit her. “I’m really glad to be doing something,” she began optimistically, referring to her school program. “Cause I pride myself – or, I shouldn’t say I ‘pride’ myself – I don’t have any. But I respect education. Education is so important to me, and I know it wouldn’t seem like that because I dropped out of school obviously, when my mom died and I was using drugs and everything. But now if I could redo it, I would. I would be a doctor for Doctors Without Borders. But, being a nurse will be almost just as good because I love all that, like, medical stuff and blood and gore and all that,” she laughed.

Later in our conversation though, Amanda sounded more uncertain. “When I’m at my aunt’s I do everything I’m supposed to do. But, like, I’m just finding it really hard having, um, enthusiasm for school, kind of? I just need – there’s something missing. It’s like the changes in my life aren’t happening fast enough, you know what I mean? Like, there’s no gratification at all in my life. I don’t have fun. The thing about living in the Valley that is good, is it’s a calm lifestyle. But at the same time, I have no social life out here. I don’t drive or anything, so it’s so hard to get around. I’m so short on money right now anyways though. I’m still on welfare and it sucks.”
“I’ve been slipping,” she admitted. “I’ll go and be bad [do drugs] for a day down there [in the Downtown Eastside]. And then I feel terrible. But, at the moment, when I’m down there I’m enthralled in it and I’m playing that role again, you know what I mean? I go into that fantasyland for a day. It’s like Never Never Land down there. You can forget everything else. So, I’m just kinda teeter tottering between that fantasy world and getting my shit together. I don’t know. Still just, um, kinda lost I guess?” Across from where Amanda was living with her Aunt was a penitentiary. You could see the prison yard fence from where we sat together on some steps, while Amanda chain smoked cigarettes and her pet Chihuahua ran around in circles in front of us. “I just sit here a lot of the time,” she said, inhaling. “I listen to people’s conversations and arguments cause everything echoes across the valley, right? I can hear all of the announcements over the loud speaker in the prison yard.” She added, “It’s funny how much time I spend staring at that barb wire fence out here. Like, that’s to keep the prisoners in, but sometimes I feel like I’m the one who’s trapped – it’s almost as if the wire is there for me, you know what I mean?”

For a number of youth, the sense that they now had nothing left to do beyond sitting in an apartment or house on welfare – where they were safe, perhaps, from “risk,” but not from the structural violence of socioeconomic marginalization and boredom – generated significant anxiety (Spacks 1995; Raposa 1999; Jervis, Spicer et al. 2003). Partly in response, some made the decision to re-enter the “fantasyland” of the drug scene periodically. In certain moments, the rapid succession of risks and
rewards that characterizes life on the streets – a sense of being in something – seemed preferable to a sense that they were still, in spite of their efforts to “do everything they were supposed to do,” going nowhere (Adler 1993). It must also be noted that “getting lost” in drug use was not always framed negatively by youth. It could be framed as a highly pleasurable “escape” from everyday life (or, it was framed as an escape that young people required in order to keep going at all; Moore 2004; Hunt, Evans et al. 2007; Hunt and Evans 2008; Moore 2008; Lorvick, Bourgois et al. 2012).

“On the streets, you’re so used to having that constant, stressful stimulation,” Amanda reflected as I prepared to leave. “And then you move out of all of that, and, everything is kind of sedated. Everything’s fine. But there’s a satisfaction in it, when you’re in the scene. You’re always fixing things, you know what I mean? You’re like, ‘Oh my god I’m sick!’ [from withdrawal]. ‘Oh my god I have no money!’ ‘Oh my god I have to do this!’ ‘I have to do that!’ And then you get the drugs and it’s all better, you get high, and it’s worth it, all the drama, and it starts all over again. It goes from one extreme to the other. But then when you’re out of it, it’s – there are no extremes. There’s no nothing. Like, there’s no bad, but there’s no really good either.”
Conclusion

Understandings of Vancouver as the best place on earth and the site of Canada’s poorest urban postal code\textsuperscript{16} were held in constant tension by youth, as they attempted to navigate the politics of place and make a home for themselves in the city. In downtown Vancouver in particular, the “winners” and “losers” of neoliberal economic restructuring and the dismantling of social security exist side by side. Wealth and poverty, progress and fixity are all highly visible in the urban landscape (Sassen 2007; Roe 2009/10). In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the fracturing of place by socioeconomic hierarchies can generate structural, symbolic and everyday violence for those at the bottom. However, I have also shown that the fractured city can be the site of imaginaries of inclusion that reflect powerful material desires and entrepreneurial expectations, even among those young people who are positioned outside of the means to pursue these (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000).

Over time, the disjuncture between youth’s desires and the severely constrained possibilities of place they experienced in the city could be internalized as “just the way things were” for people “like them,” who consistently found themselves “going nowhere” in places like hometowns, reserves, jails and the streets of Vancouver (Jervis, Spicer et al. 2003; Musharbash 2007; Willging, Quintero et al. 2011; Bengtsson 2012). Youth often expressed their social, economic and spatial

\textsuperscript{16}“Canada’s poorest postal code” is a phrase that has been commonly employed in the media to refer to the Downtown Eastside.
exclusion across time through the language of boredom (Willging, Quintero et al. 2011). It was a vocabulary of motive youth used to explain how they ended up on the streets (“I was just so bored at my group home”), how they transitioned into increasingly harmful drug use practices (“I get bored of one drug and I move on to the next”), and why they wanted to exit the drug scene (“I want to go back to school and get a job, because it’s just so boring out here all the time”). Furthermore, young people used the language of boredom to explain why, even after exiting the drug scene for a period of time, they may re-enter it periodically as a way of being in something (“When you’re out of it, there are no extremes. There’s no nothing. There’s no bad, but there’s no good either”). The relationship between boredom and “risk” has only recently garnered the attention of drug researchers (German and Latkin 2012). Clearly, the affect of boredom can feed into a desire for escape, including the escape bound up in substance use (Brown 2010). The results of this research, however, support an emerging body of literature that suggests boredom may be more productively analyzed as a manifestation of structural violence (Jervis, Spicer et al. 2003; Anderson 2004; Mains 2007; Willging, Quintero et al. 2011; Bengtsson 2012; German and Latkin 2012). More specifically, boredom can emerge from the gap between youth’s visions of meaningful progress – of what they imagine their futures should look like as they get older and move into adulthood – and the social locations they find themselves occupying across time.
My findings underscore that, far from discarding societal goals, young people who are marginalized may internalize these to an even greater extent (Young 1999). The youth who participated in this study expressed strong desires to get a university education – not just their GED; to live in a “nice” neighbourhood – not just the Downtown Eastside; and to go shopping in malls and “normal” stores – not just stand in food line-ups. They wanted to believe that they could one day live in the new condos going up in the Downtown Eastside, and eventually run businesses like the café bars. Even as they entered their late twenties, the youth who participated in this research continued to believe in vague messages about “being anything you want when you grow up,” provided you tried hard enough (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000).

And yet, as young people became increasingly dependent on the downtown social service infrastructure to meet their needs, it became more and more difficult for them to enact forms of belonging and becoming in Vancouver beyond those offered by this infrastructure. A fear of getting lost in the city could refer to the everyday violence of various kinds of disappearances on the streets. But it could also refer to becoming increasingly “fixed in place” in downtown Vancouver and entrenched in an adult “community of clients” in the Downtown Eastside (Roe 2009/10). The results of this research illustrate that the social service infrastructure has the power to both include and exclude in complex ways. It can provide meaningful possibilities for belonging and becoming in the city – a number of youth
aspired to one day work in these services, or become “peer researchers” – and it can seem to position youth outside of “normal,” big city dreams and certain forms of urban citizenship (Roe 2009/10). There were ways around this, however. In Chapter 6, I explore intensive involvement in street-level drug dealing and low-level, gang related crime as alternative ways into these dreams, and the places that symbolize them in Vancouver – albeit temporarily.
Figure 10 *Untitled*
Figure 11 Untitled
Figure 12 Untitled
Figure 13 *Untitled*
Figure 14 *Untitled*
Figure 15 *Untitled*
Chapter 6

Material and Moral Economies

Regimes of living

Terry had a black eye and numerous cuts on his face when he walked into the ARYS office in the late summer of 2011. Our plan that day was to travel out to Delta, to take photographs of the neighbourhood where he grew up before entering the foster care system at age 11. Terry longed to reconnect with his family, who had adopted him when he was 2 years old. He adamantly believed that their unconditional support would motivate him to quit using drugs and doing crime for good (Mayock, Corr et al. 2011). Terry was not welcome in his childhood home, although he remained close with his grandmother who also lived in Delta. While she would not permit Terry to live with her, she did collect the rent portion of his Disability 2 cheque at her address, and invited him over once a month (or whenever he was released from jail) for a home cooked meal and so that he could pick up his money.

Up until a week earlier, I had not seen Terry in over six months. During that time, he had sent me several letters from prison. These letters mostly contained stories from his childhood. In particular, they detailed his initiation into violent,
gang-related crime at age 13, which he recalled as simultaneously exhilarating and
terrifying:

Hi Danya how are you I’m fine thankz. I am sorry I was unable to be @ your office
monday But I’ve Been in Jail since Thursday night. I’m locked up once again. I missed a
probation appointment and found myself on the wrong side of the LAW. Oh well. Should
be out in less than a month gonna get 2-4-1 days [going to serve half the time] because
I’m in segregation 23 hour lockdown due to overflow in the Jails. they’ve got no more
Room here.

I’m gonna try & write that diary I told you about in my last letter. I’m gonna write
about previous days/weeks/months/years in my life and I’m also gonna write some pages
on days that are happening as we speak. I’m hoping it comes in handy in your Project 4
UBC & I’m hoping some of the info will go in your Book. Included in this letter is a page
that covers two or three days that took place over a week about 5-6 years ago. While I was
wasting away in a foster house. It was a lot of fun But this was about the time my life
flipped & turned upside down. this time would change the course of my life & this is
where stuff goes haywire.

A Short Story By: T. R. N. ©

Life in The Fast Lane:

Darius knocked on my door. I opened it he said, ah wanna Jack a Ride [steal a car]? Hell
yeah! Oh man! Its fun as hell. So what do you think can I Parallel park this car @ 100
mph screech rrr screeeech perfect. Told ya I’d Been Practicing never had a license But I’d
chase most pros off the track in seconds. Doin burnouts, drivin around. High speed chase
getting away from the cops. It was Awesome.

That’s how it started it was fuckin scary. I thought I’m gonna to die. It was like shooting heroin, snorting coke & smoking a Joint one after the other while on the world’s scariest roller coaster. the beginning of a long long love – hate Relationship. They [gang members] said Yeah, hell have a gun. Pull it. Five grand later and one less hater.

There is always work. When it’s not Legit you Just create Your own. Make – money – Take – money. “Hard work the only kind of work that works” ← a line from a movie

The story in Terry’s letter was a continuation of one he had told me over three years earlier, during our first in-depth interview in 2008 when he was 18 years old. “The foster care home was really, uh” – he searched for the word – “menacing? Everything was too lenient, so we took advantage all the time. We ended up going out at night to do stuff like, um, stealing cars, doing robberies. I didn’t feel like I would be in danger at first,” he added quickly. “No one thinks they’re going to end up being a homeless junkie for the rest of their lives at that point. [Mid-level gang members] would just show up at the foster house, right? In their nicest clothes, with their nicest cars, stuff like that. It would always be when they had a bunch of money, eh? They’d have like two grand in their pocket and they’d want to make some more money out of it. So they’d come to us and they’d be like, enticing you to do it, like, ‘I’ll give you like 500 bucks right now, but next week you gotta bring me a [stolen] car.’ And that’s how I got hooked up with those people. They came over to the foster
house. They partied with us. They drank with us. They had all the money and they were the ones running the show.”

“In some ways it’s the time of our lives, right?” Terry paused to gauge my reaction, as youth always did when they made these kinds of positive statements about drug use and crime. No matter how often I insisted that I wasn’t interested in the “right” answers to my questions (i.e., that all drugs are bad, all violence is evil, and all crime is nothing more than a means to an end), youth often felt compelled to give them to me anyways. “But then it started to become more aggressive. Like – it was such a bad situation, eh? It really changed my life. The whole time I was doing that stuff I remember I had this really vivid image in my head that I was going to die – like I could picture it exactly, how it would happen. I was robbing [marijuana] grow-ops every weekend. Like people were hiring us to rob gang members’ grow-ops. They like people who are young to do that stuff, because you don’t get busted, really. And when you do it’s very minimal sentencing, so [gangs] don’t have to worry about people narking [cooperating with police], cause they’re gonna be out in like two weeks anyways. And besides,” he said, laughing nervously, “you knew that if you didn’t do it for them or if you talked, you’d get your legs broken or something like that, right? Like, it was fun, but you got beat up at the same time.” Terry added flatly, “It was like when the person who is abusing you is also giving you candy.” Several months later, I learned that he had meant this literally, and not as an analogy. Terry had been severely abused by a family friend for several years when
he was a young child, and had stayed silent about it until long after his family placed him in government care for “problem behavior” at home and in school.

When I first met Terry in 2008, he had only recently become homeless in the city. For two years prior to that, he had been living in an apartment complex in Burnaby, which one of his foster fathers had helped him to secure as part of a “youth agreement” when he was 16 years old. This legal agreement with the Ministry of Children and Family Development allows youth to live independently as emancipated minors, provided they meet certain obligations, such as working towards school completion and maintaining steady employment. While Terry had been initiated into crime when he was 13 years old, for several years he moved between legal and illegal work. When he was 15, for example, he hopped a train to a city in the interior of British Columbia and found temporary work clearing the debris out of construction sites. Upon returning to Vancouver when he was 16, he secured work with a local contracting company, also with the help of his foster father. Terry spent the next year and a half working on the construction of new Boston Pizza locations all over Greater Vancouver. Simultaneously, a friend from one of his old group homes unofficially moved into his apartment in Burnaby. Through the gang connections the two of them had established while in care, they began dealing drugs out of the apartment complex where they lived. During this time, Terry also continued to steal the odd car for profit.
Even in 2011, after he had been homeless in Vancouver for almost four years, Terry loved to reminisce at length about this time in his life. “I’ve driven Mercedes, Acuras, Range Rovers, you name it,” he bragged that day, as we sped out of the downtown core on a SkyTrain that would take us part of the way to his childhood neighbourhood in Delta (Figure 17). “Been in every [night]club in Vancouver pretty much, even though I was way too young to be in there, right? I used to order the most expensive stuff on the menu – don’t even really know what I drank, eh? But I just know it was the most expensive, and had names I couldn’t pronounce. And I bought clothes! Nice clothes. I used to wear suits that cost like 300 bucks a pop. I had a good girlfriend. Her dad was a doctor. She lived in a beach house four blocks from where my parents live. She had a golden retriever, and we used to take it for walks on the beach.”

This social spatial mobility was short lived, however. “I’m not sure why my whole life collapsed,” Terry reflected, staring intently at the strip of advertising above the windows of the SkyTrain car. I couldn’t tell if he was looking at the large, multi-panel ad for the government-initiated DrugsNot4Me campaign17 (which cost an estimated 1.06 million dollars), or the ad beside it, which detailed a new dental assistant training program at a local college (Health Canada 2010; Geddes 2010).

17 Through the use of before and after images, this ad depicts a white, middle class young woman transforming from a “normal kid” hanging out with friends at school into an emaciated “addict” with sores on her face and mouth, and wearing a more sexually provocative outfit.
Terry continued, “I guess it all started to break apart when I went back to jail. When I was – well I’ve been to jail numerous times for pretty much every offence you can imagine,” he laughed. I noticed several people in the train car sneak glances in our direction. Terry made no effort to lower his voice, however, as he elaborated on his criminal past. “When I got out that one time – right before I became homeless down here? I ended up getting kicked out of our apartment [in Burnaby] because I had trashed the place and been arrested. And anyways,” he added, “my youth agreement was going to be up soon at that point cause I was 18, right? So I might have been homeless soon anyways, eh?\(^\text{18}\)

Upon leaving government care, Terry immediately applied for disability assistance (he had an “official” diagnosis of schizophrenia, and “unofficially” suffered from chronic pain as a result of a car accident he had been in as a teenager). He found himself without a place to stay, and forced to access shelter services in downtown Vancouver. Once there, homelessness, school incompletion, joblessness, reliance on social assistance, and unaddressed mental health and chronic pain issues aligned in a way that made transitions to more “risky” levels of heroin and crack cocaine use increasingly congruent with everyday lived experience. “It started how it always does,” he sighed. “I was depressed about losing my place, and one thing

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\(^\text{18}\) Each year in British Columbia, over 1000 youth in various kinds of government care (foster and group care homes, independent living arrangements) turn 19 and age out of eligibility for that care (Woolley 2013). There is no official record of how many of these youth end up on the streets of Vancouver, but a 2007 report estimated that forty percent of “street-involved youth” in Vancouver had spent time in a foster or group home (The McCreary Centre Society 2007).
leads to the next and then all of a sudden you’re addicted, the money has stopped flowing, you’re stealing, and living on the street, and your family doesn’t want anything to do with you. I lost my girlfriend too. She broke up with me.”

“So what’s been happening this last week?” I asked him, as we sat on a bench waiting for the bus that would take us the rest of the way to the house where Terry’s parents and sister still lived. While he was not allowed to step foot on the property, Terry was eager to photograph the house from a distance, as a symbol of where he hoped to be living in a year’s time (Figure 19). His photo essay centered on “getting back to” fond childhood memories, before the drugs and crime had “taken over” his life. Through his photo essay, Terry seemed to be actively re-imagining an idealized past in relation to a pained present (Casey 1987; Stewart 1988; Gowan 2000).

“What’s been happening? Nothing good,” he shrugged, kicking the concrete repeatedly with his foot. “I’ve been using a lot of drugs. Heroin mainly. And crack. I’ve had some [injection-related] abscesses, and a couple of things like that. Been in and out of jail, for shoplifting and stuff. Hanging out with people I shouldn’t be hanging out with,” he chuckled, referring to individuals who were more heavily involved in crime. “Last three days, I’ve been sleeping under the fricking Shopper’s Drug Mart overhang.” The Shopper’s Drug Mart to which Terry was referring was just a few blocks from the ARYS office in the Downtown South. Ironically, this was the same Shopper’s Drug Mart where he had been arrested eight months earlier for
shoplifting over $300 worth of health care products. Terry and a number of other youth were banned from entering this store, and had to wait outside whenever I went in to purchase the disposable cameras that we sometimes used for their photography projects. They were, however, generally permitted to sleep outside under the overhang, or in a small alcove on the side of the building, on flattened cardboard they had fished out of a large industrial recycling bin behind the store (Figure 16).

In addition to shoplifting, in 2011 Terry was also engaged in “flipping” drugs whenever possible – that is, buying and re-selling small quantities of drugs in order to generate a modest profit. The incremental amounts of income he accrued in this way were almost always immediately put towards his own next ten dollar point of heroin, which he commonly purchased from an older woman camped out on a lawn chair in front of the Bottle Depot in the Downtown Eastside. This was also the place where he sold and exchanged stolen merch. In 2011, Terry typically moved in and out of this vicinity multiple times per day via public buses and the SkyTrain, which transported him to and from the various places where he shoplifted all over Greater Vancouver.

On Welfare Wednesdays when Terry had an extra influx of cash, he often travelled by SkyTrain out to a crack shack in Burnaby where he still had a “hook up” (connection to a higher level dealer) from his foster care days. There, he purchased a
larger quantity of drugs for a better price than was possible to negotiate downtown, where he subsequently flipped this product for a profit. When it came to this kind of street-level drug dealing, the Downtown Eastside was viewed as an equal opportunity employer. “Downtown Vancouver here, Hasting’s Hastings,” Terry said to me on one occasion as we were walking through the neighbourhood. “The police don’t give a shit what happens here,” he smirked, gesturing vaguely at the buzzing congregation of dealers and users on the corner of Main and Hastings. “Anyone can sell dope just about anywhere they want. There are only a few corners that are owned turf [controlled by a local gang].”

The fact that street-level drug dealing is to a large extent permitted in the Downtown Eastside was, in many moments, celebrated by youth like Terry as a frontier of economic opportunity in the margins (Roitman 2005), in which anyone could legitimately stake a claim and potentially “get ahead” in the city. In other moments, however, this leniency fueled the symbolic violence of “ending up” in the neighbourhood. Young people did not embrace the image of Vancouver as the site of world-class progressive social and drug policies in straightforward ways (and, in many moments, they expressed markedly conservative views regarding the need to “crack down” on open drug use in the city, and in the Downtown Eastside in particular). Relaxed policing in the Downtown Eastside is in part motivated by the city’s commitment to harm reduction as one of the “four pillars” necessary for reducing drug-related harms (City of Vancouver 2012). However, it was read by
some youth as evidence that “normal” people “didn’t give a shit” about what happened down there, further underscoring the marginality of the neighbourhood, and the extent to which it was a glaring exception to the politics of place that existed in “nicer” parts of Vancouver (where open drug use and dealing are strictly prohibited; Roe 2009/10). This marginality was only compounded by the fact that strictly enforced hierarchies of organized crime are also largely absent from the Hastings corridor.

“Everyone down here tries to be a baller [higher level “player” in the drug dealing game] on welfare day,” Terry explained. “People think, ‘Woo hoo, I got this much money. I’m gonna buy five hundred dollars worth of drugs and sell it all and then I’ll always have drugs.’ But no one ever does it because the drugs *do* them, they don’t do the dope. The next day everyone’s on the grind. ‘Oh, can I front ten bucks?’ Blah, blah, blah. Everyone’s broke or in debt.” This was a pattern that Terry himself seemed to repeat month after month. As often as not, in spite of his intention to procure a better deal on drugs in the suburbs, he would end up spending his entire cheque – and then some – in the Downtown Eastside, resulting in the kind of smaller scale drug debt that had likely earned him those cuts and bruises on his face in 2011. When he did make it out to the crack shack in Burnaby, he commonly used some, and occasionally all, of the drugs he planned on selling before leaving.
That day out in Delta, as we walked through his childhood neighbourhood, Terry reflected suddenly, “Society doesn’t allow people to bring themselves up very high, you know? I feel like society is ushering us away, putting us in the background. Like, with the Eastside and everything? It’s in the corners, where it’s being shamed. Like, you know, [society says] just go hide in your corner, where you can do whatever you want, and don’t come out until you’re done. I’d like to be a contributing member of society,” he continued emphatically, almost as if I was arguing with him when in fact I had said nothing at all. “And people have said that to me before, you know, my dad, ‘Why don’t you contribute to society, you lazy bum!’ ‘Why don’t you make something of your life!’ ‘Why don’t you do this or that!’ You know? And for me, it’s like, ‘Well, you know, I really want to, but I can’t seem to get ahead.’” He added more calmly, “If nobody allows you to get ahead, and you’re not making chances yourself, then you’re not going to get anywhere in this city, right?”

“So what do you do?” I asked, as he took photograph after photograph of the skate park where he used to go after school when he was 9 or 10 years old (Figure 20).

“There’s always some way around it I guess, right?” he replied distractedly. “People not giving you a chance. You can always get away with something, or you can always – I mean, there’s always the back alley way, there’s always, uh, the rip-
them-off-until-you’re-ahead way. I’m still working with some people that do some
things that I probably shouldn’t be involved in,” he smiled. “You don’t always have
to go to jail, I guess.” He sounded less than convinced. During my almost 5 year
study period, Terry cycled in and out of jail at least a dozen times. He was 13 years
old the first time he went to a juvenile detention facility for stealing a car and taking
it out for a joyride with a number of other kids at one of his group homes. As he got
older, the arrests became more and more frequent.

“What did you think about jail when you were younger? Like, when you were
a kid?” I asked him, as we walked away from the skate park and emerged onto a
large open field.

“Honestly it was never on my mind,” he replied, focusing the lens. “It just
appeared one day at my back doorstep and said ‘Welcome home, Sir!’” He added
after a while, “Jail’s not so bad, though, you know? You’re all refreshed and ready to
go. It cleans me up. Every time I go to jail, it’s like – not a vacation, but, like, ‘clean
time.’ Gain some weight, get healthy. That’s usually what happens in jail –
especially if you get two years plus a day. If you get under two years you go to
provincial [jail]. But if you get two years plus a day you go to federal [jail] and you
get all these programs, which is great. There should be more of those in jail.” He
snapped a picture of his shadow across the tall, yellowed grass that edged the open
field, before adding, “I’d rather be in jail than be homeless sometimes. I know
people that intentionally get caught so they can go there. I get it. I do. The only time I ever get to get away is when I go to jail, you know?"

Later, this photograph (Figure 21) would generate significant discussion, when it was shared among all of the youth who had created photo essays as a part of this research. Some youth felt that the small size of Terry’s shadow, cast onto the scenic backdrop of the field in the bright sun, symbolized a sense of disappearing from the landscape. Others, including Terry, thought that it symbolized a desire to be a part of the scene, and hope for a different kind of future. It is as close to a self-portrait as is possible to include in this thesis.

**Introduction**

It has been suggested that neoliberal economic restructuring in the spheres of housing, employment, social security, education, crime and justice are increasingly creating places estranged from the social and economic mainstream (Jervis, Spicer et al. 2003; Ferguson 2006; Pitts 2008). The young people who live in these towns, reserves, neighbourhoods and cities are simultaneously excluded and included by the operation of neoliberal markets, however. In diverse settings, youth increasingly embrace, and feel embraced by, big city dreams of careers and capitalist consumption, in spite of growing up poor (Koselleck 1985 [1979]; Mains 2007; Sassen 2007). At the same time, as the gulf between the rich and poor widens, youth find themselves increasingly dislocated from the institutions and opportunity structures that would
allow them to realize desired futures (Young 1999; Howanda and De Boeck 2005). In such contexts, youth may be willing to entertain extraordinary levels of risk, and fantasy, in order to find a way into the life worlds they imagine for themselves (Willis 1977; Weiss 2002; Cole 2004; Mains 2007; Musharbash 2007; Willging, Quintero et al. 2011). Thus, in the border zones of Cameroon, armed factions of young men create licit wealth through the violent, illicit seizure of government-transported goods (Roitman 2005), and in Ethiopia, groups of youth “sit around,” preferring to imagine their eventual migration to America via the elusive US Diversity Lottery rather than accept “demeaning” forms of work in the informal economy (Mains 2007). Young people in rural New Mexico traffic bodies across international borders – or join the military – in the hopes of realizing more expansive futures (Willging, Quintero et al. 2011), and in cities all over North America, young men and women sell drugs on scales both large and small in pursuit of “crazy money” (Adler 1993; Bourgois 1996; Maher 1997). The regimes of living young people enact in response to the exigencies produced by neoliberal forces articulate global conditions of possibility (Ong and Collier 2005); yet, they are highly situated and contingent configurations that are nowhere the same and continually subject to revision over time (Collier and Lakoff 2005; Shoveller, Elliott et al. 2005; Goldenberg, Shoveller et al. 2010; Brown, Shoveller et al. 2013).

In this chapter, I build on this previous work, by exploring the material and moral economies of street-level drug dealing and low-level, gang-related crime
among youth who inhabit the social, spatial and economic margins of the Greater Vancouver urban landscape. I highlight the shifting and multiple regimes of living that Terry was engaged in over time, in order to begin situating these material and moral economies within the wider social spatial landscape of exclusions and desires that shaped young people’s sense of place in the city. Dealing and crime cannot be understood independently of the forces of structural, symbolic and everyday violence that constrained the possibilities of place for youth across their lives (Bourgois 1996; Baron 2008; Pitts 2008). In the context of this study, the inevitability of youth’s incarceration as a result of these activities was similarly a powerful reflection of their entrenched marginality. However, while individual lives are defined by material contexts, they are also generative of new contexts (Das 1997; Roitman 2005). In this chapter, I therefore also illustrate the ways in which dealing and crime configured new value systems and moral logics in relation to the tremendous risks and potential rewards of life in the margins, and created new subjectivities centered around these visions of the “ethical” (Collier and Lakoff 2005; Roitman 2005).

From a methodological perspective, taking seriously young people’s work was a far more effective way into their life worlds than a focus on their dis-abilities (Gowan 2000; Bourgois, Prince et al. 2004). Approximately three quarters of the youth who participated in this research had engaged in drug dealing at some point during the study period. Of course, “drug dealing” is a broad category. It can refer
to anything from flipping drugs for small amounts of profit, to moving larger quantities of drugs for one of Vancouver’s major criminal organizations, which could result in thousands of dollars of profit per week. Similarly, gangs can refer to anything from groups of youth “hanging out” and “getting into trouble” to well-established criminal organizations (Gordon 2000; Pitts 2008). Patty described forming an all-girl Native gang when she lived on the streets in Edmonton – to become a member, young women had to rob someone at knifepoint. The rest of the young people I knew who identified themselves as gang-involved were associated with, but by no means “made members” of, one of Vancouver’s well-known criminal organizations. While the upper levels of these organizations may be characterized by established hierarchies of bosses and made members, at the lowest levels relationships between bosses and “workers” seemed much more ephemeral – collaborations formed and disbanded over time, creating a fluid labour market of sorts (Roitman 2005). This was particularly apparent when youth who had “left the business” or “retired” temporarily attempted to re-establish old connections – they always found themselves starting at the bottom of the ladder again, since previously established hierarchies at these low levels had long ago dissolved. In 2009, Vancouver was the site of a gang war in which dozens of people were killed as various organizations vied for turf. In 2011, one of British Columbia’s most notorious gangsters was gunned down outside a hotel in Kelowna (a city in the interior of the province). While gang dynamics at the highest levels were not a focus
of my research, the street-based drug scene in Greater Vancouver was altered by these events. On the streets and in prisons, these dynamics were experienced as “complete disorganization,” with certain gangs frantically recruiting whomever they could. Gang associations at the lowest levels became even more fleeting as a result.

A large body of research has investigated drug dealing and crime as gendered phenomena (Bourgois 1996; Maher 1997; Brown 1998; Denton and O’Malley 1999; Laidler and Hunt 2001; Hutton 2005; Contreras 2009; Fitzgerald 2009). While this was not the focus of my research, my findings are consistent with many of the observations contained in this previous work. Street-level drug dealing and gang-related crime among young men were, in many moments, situated performances of masculinity centered on toughness, aggression, street smarts and work ethic (Katz 1988; Messerschmidt 1993; Connell 1995; Bourgois 1996; Brown 1998). As I will describe further below, these performances were particularly integral to continually (re)producing a particular moral logic of the gang on the streets and in prisons. Also consistent with previous work, I knew a number of young women who were actively involved in dealing and violent crime (Maher 1997; Denton and O’Malley 1999; Laidler and Hunt 2001). In contrast to previous work (Hutton 2005; Contreras 2009), young men often expressed respect and even admiration towards these young women (to me at least). Since a shared moral code on the streets (in theory) prohibited violence perpetrated by men against women, young men would often
“hire” these women to do enforcement (deliver a brutal physical punishment) in cases where a woman had, for example, acquired a drug debt.

Nevertheless, consistent with previous work, young women were subordinated within the world of street-based crime (Maher 1997; Laidler and Hunt 2001; Hutton 2005; Contreras 2009). For example, while young men could cultivate somewhat “official,” low-level connections with criminal organizations – and were often actively recruited and tutored by more connected players from within these organizations – young women generally could not accrue these kinds of capital directly. Moreover, no matter what their street reputations for violence and criminal savvy, young women were subordinated by a moral logic of the gang that positioned them, in most moments, as “innocent victims” in need of protection and saving by men.

Still, while the kinds of social spatial mobility open to young men via low-level gang connections were not possible for the young women I knew, once they had a hook up I observed that they could carry out drug dealing on a smaller scale quite independently. Moreover, consistent with previous work (Miller 1998; Contreras 2009; Fitzgerald 2009), the young women I knew were highly adept at using the capital that was available to them – which usually revolved around their sexual attractiveness and own definitions of smartness – to manipulate their male counterparts, and exploit the latter’s connections to their independent advantage. In
contrast to previous work (Hutton 2005), the fact that young women were subordinated within the world of street-based crime often allowed them to operate under the radar. Young women may have been playing a different “game,” but they were often highly skilled at it (Hutton 2005; Fitzgerald 2009).

The voices of young men dominate this chapter. One reason for this is that while both young men and women were actively involved in dealing and crime, it was the young men I knew whose senses of place and of self across time were intimately connected to the world of crime. In the neighbourhoods of their childhoods, young men recalled being “bad kids,” “troublemakers,” “shit disturbers,” “hoodlums” and “the go-to guys” for friends who wanted to buy drugs; on the streets of Vancouver, they positioned themselves as drug dealers, gangsters, hustlers and criminals pursuing work in the alternative economy (Bourgois 1996; Roitman 2005; Willging, Quintero et al. 2011).

**Initiations**

Young men often traced their present successes in the alternative economy on the streets of Vancouver to the fathers and “father figures” who were a source of both dysfunction and recruitment into drug dealing and gang-related crime. Paul knew almost nothing about his father except that he was involved in gang-related crime and violence. He described to me during an interview in 2009 how he was recruited into drug dealing at age thirteen. “I was a messed up kid,” he began. “My
mom had gotten [re]married when I was younger, to some dude who decided he wanted to kick the shit out of me. I was in a coma. I was angry as hell, right? I was basically raised on violence. For me, reacting to a punch is second nature.” He continued with a hint of pride, “Growing up, my old man wasn’t always the greatest influence, to say the least. He wasn’t around when I was young [because he was serving a 15 year jail sentence], and my mom always was like, ‘He’s a bad man,’ and this and that, but I’d never seen it myself, right? My old man was always a knight in shining armor to me. When I was 13 years old I had the balls to walk up to a group of kids [at school] and pull out a really big knife and threaten them for something they said to a friend of mine. Basically, they called her the n-word [nigger], right? And then one night soon after, all of us from school and shit, we were drinking at the park and stuff, and this older guy came up and he’s like, ‘Hey kid, come sit down. I saw what you did the other day at school. That took a lot of balls, you know? And you won the police game. You were even able to get rid of the weapon.” Paul paused, relishing the opportunity to highlight his prowess at such an early age. “He lights a joint up, smokes with me, talks to me for about two and a half hours. By the end of it I came out a drug dealer. That was about the transition. It wasn’t so much, ‘You want to go out there and sell drugs?’ It was, ‘Hey look, by the time you’re sixteen you can have a nice new car, whatever you want,’ you know? It was like, do this and you can have all the things you want.”
Paul liked to imagine himself existing between two polarized worlds: the world of “legitimate” wealth represented by his mother’s side of the family, and the world of organized crime represented by his father. I got the feeling it was important to him that I understood he could belong in either world. He continued emphatically, “I could’ve gone to many members of my mom’s family to change where I was headed, right? They’re good friends with many, many, many high-end, rich fucking people who do legitimate shit in this city, right? They’re white collar. They’re not blue collar – like, there’s never been a fleck of dust on their white collars, right? I could’ve gone that way easily. But under the circumstances, with what was going on in my head, I saw it like this: move over here to my dad’s side, I’d have true power. People would be afraid of me. Nobody can fucking touch me, right? Because [my dad’s side of the family] never gets fucked over. You know? And when my mom’s side of the family was so fucking adamant about not doing shit when I had my head kicked in, right? With my dad that would’ve never happened.” As I will discuss further below, for young people like Paul the gang was a site in which forms of protection were founded and guaranteed (Roitman 2005). This included not only protection from the everyday violence of physical abuse and family dysfunction, but from the structural violence of economic marginality as well (Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008; Pitts 2008).

Among the young men who participated in this study, neighbourhood parks, schoolyards and homes (and later, jails) were all sites of active tutelage and
recruitment into drug dealing and gang-related crime (McCarthy and Hagan 1995; Chettleburgh 2007; Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008; Pitts 2008). Daniel’s story was strikingly similar to Paul’s. “When I was 13 I became friends with this guy who was, I later found out, a high ranking gang member,” he told me in an interview in 2008. “I asked some random chick in front of a 7-Eleven [convenience store] if she knew where to get speed [crystal meth] because we had just moved. And she brings me to his house and, I don’t know, we just kinda connected friendship-wise. Starting to sell drugs for him and what not, right?”

“How old was that guy?” I asked, somewhat incredulously. I was always amazed by the “friendships” that seemed to develop between these 13 year old kids and men who were usually much, much older.

“He was like, uh, almost 50. Yeah. I kind of looked at him like a father figure cause I never really had my dad around and I’ve always wanted to be with my dad and stuff,” Daniel admitted, somewhat sadly.

When I met Daniel in the winter of 2008 he was homeless and dealing drugs at a shelter underneath the Granville Street Bridge – an area that was notorious in the Downtown South for drug use and dealing (and as a result sometimes referred to as “the little Downtown Eastside”). The money he had made dealing drugs in the suburbs as a teenager had long ago disappeared as a result of his escalating crystal meth use, but once again someone had “taken him under their wing.” “All the
homeless street dealers live here,” he said, gesturing to the run-down shelter from where he, Kyle and I were standing in the alleyway behind it. “I started buying off of them, whatever, right? And one of the bigger crack dealers kind of took me under his wing, just so nobody would fuck around with me type of thing. Cause I guess he took a liking to me,” he laughed, “and now he keeps giving me more and more responsibility with selling and stuff, so I’ll probably be getting out of here soon again.”

Flipping drugs on the streets of downtown Vancouver, and particularly the Downtown Eastside, was considered “small time.” There was a big difference between doing that and even the most low-level involvement in organized crime. Street-level dealing in downtown Vancouver, while generally distinct from low-level involvement in organized crime, could provide an entry into it however. In the spring of 2009 Daniel was still flipping drugs in the Downtown South; by later that year, the connection he had made at the shelter under the bridge had translated into a better, low-level gang connection. He was once again back out in the suburbs, selling drugs from a crack shack on a much larger scale.

A number of the young people I knew, including a number of young women, were initiated into drug dealing and criminal activities via the elaborate social networks and hierarchies generally present at crack shacks. In these places, young people struck up various kinds of allegiances, ranging from romantic relationships to explicit business partnerships. “Everybody’s hanging out, you know, doing drugs, shooting the shit, planning a score [crime], whatever,” Brittany whispered.
We were at a crack shack in New Westminster that Brittany had assured me was safe for the uninitiated. I had first interviewed her in 2008 when she was 19 years old, and then reconnected with her in 2011 when I began to engage in more intensive fieldwork. Over that period of time, Brittany had been heavily involved in drug dealing and violent crime, and in and out of jail twice. She continued, “And then there’ll be the hang-around who wants to work, right? And not just keep dealing small time drugs in the Eastside every welfare cheque or whatever. They’ll be like, ‘Oh yeah, let me work, let me work,’ kind of thing. Maybe not saying that, but they’re always around trying to scrounge up change or [marijuana] roaches or whatever, right? Just obviously desperate, right? So someone will go, ‘Hey, instead of borrowing money or bumming change all the time, why don’t you sell these bags for me? Sell these five bags, and I’ll give you one,’ and it goes on from there. And then they own you,” she added.

**Employment and crime**

Young people’s successes in the alternative economy could be viewed as a continuation of the street smarts they had developed as children and teenagers in homes, schools, neighbourhoods and juvie (juvenile detention). However, youth also emphasized how past experiences working – and eventually losing – legitimate jobs intersected with cultivating a “hustler’s ambition” on the streets (Baron and Hartnagel 1997; Agnew 2006; Baron 2008). Slightly less than half of the youth who
participated in this study had at one time been legally employed. This work was usually low paid and temporary. Consistent with previous work, youth’s *perceptions* of unemployment – namely, skepticism regarding their chances of securing meaningful work in the future (particularly in the context of school incompletion) – could shape the transition into crime (Baron and Hartnagel 1997; Agnew 2006; Baron 2008).

“I only have a grade ten education,” Steven said during a first interview I did with him in 2008 when he was 22 years old, “but I had four jobs during my working years.” Steven’s account of his “working years” was typical of accounts I heard from other young men who had previously been employed, with the exception of the fact that he had, for a time at least, managed to obtain increasingly rare union jobs through his father’s connections. “First job I had was with my dad,” he told me, “and that was my introduction into the steel industry. But I didn’t like how their union was set up. So I left there and went to a different union place, worked there for about a year, making oodles of money. I wasn’t even doing drugs for that period of time, and I was making so much money I didn’t even know what to fucking spend it on. And then in the winter, I don’t know, there seems to be a lack of construction, and so they laid me off and I started using [crack] a lot again, cause I had all this extra money. And then when it came time to go back to work I started working somewhere else – a window place out in Langley. Worked there for like six months.” He shrugged. “I don’t know. Ended up breaking up with my baby’s mom,
and then the drugs started in again, and that’s when I started working the stupid temp jobs – lame, lame jobs that just couldn’t hold my attention span.”

A year after our first interview in 2008, Steven became heavily involved in drug dealing and crime. Looking back on this transition when I interviewed him in 2012, he reflected that, “For someone who’d been working, and trying to pay for most of their shit through working, and then losing another job, or getting a job that pays less – I eventually sorta looked into another way to make money. I was like, the economy’s going down hard, I’m gonna make my money dealing drugs.” He added, “If you’re used to having money you’re going to find a way to get money, whether it’s legal or not, right? Hustler’s ambition – doesn’t even have to be drugs. It could be anything.”

In certain moments, youth who engaged in drug dealing and crime framed their involvement in these activities as a rejection of the “nine-to-five world” of “normal” jobs. “This world is not like a nine-to-five world,” Laura told me one time, after she had had her baby and was no longer with Nick. Her sister was taking care of her child, but would not allow her to live with them as well. Laura was staying with a “friend” in his SRO in the Downtown South, and sold small quantities of crystal meth in the neighbourhood whenever she could afford it. “And like, I tried it that way and I can’t do it. I get bored really easily in that world,” she insisted. “I need to be in the center of it, you know?”
In other moments, however, youth understood drug dealing and crime to require the very same skills as other high-powered jobs (Adler 1993; Roitman 2005). They often referred to these activities as work, and articulated many of the same motivations for engaging in them as those who were formally employed. It has been argued that the world of drug dealing and crime offers youth an alternative forum for dignity in the margins (Bourgois 1996; Pitts 2008). But among many of the young people I knew, drug dealing and crime were not just about achieving respect in the subversive world of crime. They were also about the chance to achieve the same kinds of social spatial mobility and respect that “normal” jobs afforded, and to look like “just another rich kid in a mall” (and therefore unambiguously out-of-place on the streets). “Walking down the street, most people thought I was a geeky-ass student, right?” Paul said proudly in 2009. “I was eighteen and driving a brand new Mustang around. If anyone asked me, I just said, ‘My aunt and uncle bought it for me.’ They’re worth 40 million dollars, what’s a Mustang for them? Drop in the bucket, nothing. Nobody ever asked me where I got it. If it came to like, me going anywhere, going to the mall or whatever, I looked like just another normal, rich kid.”

Money, drugs and fame

Young people constructed fantastical reminiscences about the glory days of their criminal pasts. Animated retellings of crime-related achievements and defeats
in the context of this study were themselves a way of mediating experiences of boredom on the streets and being in something (Jervis, Spicer et al. 2003; Stewart 2007; Bengtsson 2012). Youth’s often exaggerated narratives underscored the link between imaginaries of desire in the city and involvement in dealing and crime.

When I met Steven in 2008, he was flipping drugs on and off while panhandling on the streets of the Downtown South. A year later, his material circumstances had changed rapidly. As he recalled in 2012, “Finally one day a friend of mine – well, this guy I knew, who became a friend – just offered me a job and said, ‘Here, I’ll give you bags of crack to sell, so see what you can do.’ And then when I showed him I could do that it was, ‘Here’s a phone,’ right? ‘Whenever I’m not around, you answer it. This phone’s gonna ring and you go see my people to pick shit up.’ Next thing I knew I was picking up [drugs] off like harsh gangsters and shit. Big time suppliers. You don’t pay them you’ll end up getting your fingers chopped off or something, right? Within six months everything changed,” he continued. “Now I have a car. Now I’m making deliveries. Now I have people working for me, right? Once I made a name for myself down here I spread out to the Tri-cities [three adjacent suburbs of Vancouver]. At the peak of it I had four people that worked for me, right? Got pretty big pretty quick. I was living with my ex-girlfriend in New West[minster]. And basically I’d just sit on my ass and they’d call me. ‘I’m finished. I’ve got your money.’ I started down on Granville [Street in the Downtown South] small, and by the end I had a four thousand dollar a day business,” he said proudly.
Street-based drug dealing and crime represented a way into an alternative material economy in the city, in which risk could be met with substantial financial reward (Adler 1993). Steven’s insistence that he was at one time making four thousand dollars a day, however, was almost certainly an exaggeration. Although he may have been moving that amount of product on some occasions, most of the profits generated would have been handed off to higher-level players. But, street-based dealing and crime was also a way into an alternative moral economy – one in which achievements and understandings of the good were based not on official education level or the length of a resume, but on the ability to successfully risk risk without being caught by police, or edged out by others playing the same game (Adler 1993). Becoming immersed in this alternative moral economy could allow young people in the margins to feel like they were, as Laura put it, in the center of something (Fitzgerald, Dovey et al. 2004). My discussion to this point should make clear that this affective state of being in something went far beyond conventional notions of “thrill seeking.”

Youth appeared to relish talking at length about the things they had been able to buy and social spatial worlds they had been able to enter as a result of dealing and crime. Money was desire frozen; it was the way youth kept score, and the way they knew how valuable they were (Pitts 2008). Paul recalled enthusiastically, “I had a sixty-inch TV. I had anything you could ever dream of. I would walk into the store and see the best thing – that’s how I shopped. I was like, ‘Yo give me the biggest and
best TV you got.’ ‘Okay sir, you sure?’ ‘Yeah I want that one bro. Hook me up man. Cash work?’ ‘That always works.’ That’s what I’d worked for since I was thirteen years old, right? To have my things and my place set up like that.” Paul continued somewhat dramatically, “I was never addicted to the drugs that were around me. I was addicted to the life, is the best way I can put it. I was addicted to the fact that there’s a hundred people standing out in front of the [night]club, and then you’ve got me, this eighteen year old kid, walking in past you, you know? We were clearing ten grand a week. I’d be buying my workers new clothes, right? ‘Let’s go to Gucci.’ ‘All my boys here need new gear.’ And that never got old. Like when you go to do that and you hear the one clerk say to the other one, ‘Yo, man that guy just blew thirty five hundred dollars and they’re not walking out with anything in their hands.’ You know? Like, ‘He just blew a month’s earnings for me, and they’re not even carrying the clothes out, they’re wearing it out.’”

Steven echoed Paul’s sentiments during our conversation in 2012. “That lifestyle was just kind of awesome,” he smiled. “Not the whole like doing drugs and getting all fucked up part, but like –I would walk into a condo, okay, during the Olympics? And I would basically go and sit down with people from all over the world. And we’d just be shooting the shit, smoking, drinking, enjoying each other’s company. And I would walk out with like thirteen hundred dollars of my own money just because of, you know, selling drugs.” He added wistfully, “Like people don’t make that in a month if they work a job, you know?”
The moral logic of the gang

“I have a hero complex,” Paul began on one occasion in 2011. He, his childhood friend (and former “business” partner) Connor and I were sitting around in a MacDonald’s restaurant in East Vancouver. “Somebody says ‘Go after women and children’ and I say ‘Go get the hell out of here or you’re going to be the one who’s next,’ right? I’ve had a few situations [related to doing enforcement] where families were about to get involved, and I don’t agree with that. It’s not acceptable – like, if you look at most films about the Italian Mob, and stuff, you see that families are off limits, right? A guy will get his head crushed in a vice, but no one dares go after their family. That was something I lived by at that point in time. It’s a gang thing. When it came to business I was a very ruthless individual – that’s why I moved up very fast. But there were rules.”

Paul continued, gesturing at Connor, “When I was seventeen, we were in Kelowna [in the interior of British Columbia]. I was sent up there by the boss to work with one of his old associates, right? Cause at this point I’m his shining star. End of the summer, we did a kidnapping. Not even business related, just personal. I didn’t really have much of a choice. We threw him in the car, took him to a field, and we were this close to lighting the guy on fire. No one had a lighter, if you can believe it. I didn’t learn until I was incarcerated and we went to court [for the kidnapping] why we had done this, right? He touched a four year old girl. Which I think is the most despicable thing on the planet. If I had known my hero complex would’ve kicked in
and I probably would’ve lit him on fire myself. I did six months as a juvenile [in jail for the kidnapping].”

Far from signifying the absence of a coherent grounds for ethical reasoning, among young men like Paul and Connor the gang seemed to engender a distinct moral logic in which physical violence was clearly administrable (Roitman 2005). The moral logic of the gang was discursively produced not only through situated performances on the streets, in courtrooms and in jails, but also through the narrative devices of popular gangster films and the imagery of hip hop and rap music (Visano 2006; Hagedorn 2008; Pitts 2008). A materialist perspective views the gang as the product of a world demarcated by social and economic exclusion; even a tenuous connection to organized crime can provide youth with a way in. Money and the things it bought were a large part of what motivated the young men in this study to become involved with gangs. However, over emphasis on the material at the expense of the moral can obscure the complexity of youth’s motivations for embroiling themselves in highly “risky” gang-related endeavors (Pitts 2008). Gang involvement is not just about social mobility and economic advancement – certainly not at the lowest levels, where status and wealth are fleeting at best (Bourgois 1996; Maher 1997). The young men I knew seemed to equally embrace the world of the gang because it was an intelligible site of moral reasoning and ethical action. In the gang, the lines were clearly drawn. An ethical orientation towards violence as governable seemed to be a comfort on some level to youth like Paul and Connor, for
whom chaos, instability and powerlessness had been the only constants in their lives growing up (Roitman 2005; Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008). Youth also seemed to embrace the lines drawn by the gang around drug use. Visible addictions to heroin, crack cocaine and crystal meth were generally prohibited (while marijuana smoking could be integral to forms of criminal sociality; Mackenzie, Hunt et al. 2006). This led some youth to joke that gang involvement was its own form of particularly effective addiction “treatment.”

On the streets of Vancouver, youth drew on the moral logic of the gang to position themselves as heroes who protected innocent women and children, and loyal workers who did what they were told and kept their mouths shut no matter what – even if it meant going to jail. These complex regimes of living should not be reduced to, or celebrated as, oppositional “subcultures” or “identities” forged in the margins (Moore 2004). Far from existing in opposition to state control, they often existed in mutually perpetuating and complicitous relationships with state infrastructures and ideologies (Adler 1993; Collier and Lakoff 2005; Roitman 2005; Visano 2006). For example, a war on drugs and crime in Vancouver that targets young men, and the near inevitability of jail time for youth who are street-involved and engaged in the most visible and risky forms of crime, perpetuated and to an extent engendered regimes of living like the honorable criminal who “takes a pinch” (goes to jail) rather than rat on a higher level gang member. Conversely, by allowing youth to make sense of and meaning out of their marginality, these regimes of living
perpetuated youth’s engagement in crime on the streets – thereby fueling arguments for heightened policing and tougher jail sentences in response to escalating public “disorder” from some segments of society.

“Jail is something we all want to avoid,” Paul insisted in MacDonald’s that day, although the excitement in his voice painted a more complex picture. “But when you do get locked up, there’s pride in that, right? You may have taken a pinch, but you did it right cause you kept your mouth shut and didn’t give anybody up.”

“That’s something to be extremely proud of in that lifestyle,” Connor added forcefully. “You get respect for it. The top guys [in jail] see that, and usually you end up doing some stuff for one of them when you get out.”

Some regimes of living, like the “heroic gangster” who protects women and children, engaged with state infrastructures and ideologies in more explicit ways. Youth saw the gang as exacting punishments where the state had failed. On the streets and in jail, rape and child molestation got you killed. Extreme acts of violence, when administered according to a strict moral logic, lent the gang a sort of ethical superiority to the state for many youth. This was particularly the case, perhaps, for those young men whose own childhood abuse had gone unacknowledged by the government, or occurred while they were in government care. A boastful contempt for the law on the streets and in jails was a central part of how the moral logic of the gang was constituted (Pitts 2008). “I’ve been walking by
groups of cops, and they all look at the ground when I’m with certain people, right?” Paul smirked, “They know they could die if they pissed off my old boss. VPD [Vancouver police department] gets paid a decent amount. But the contracts that we’d put on their head would be more than they make a year.”

Youth had experienced tremendous loss as a result of gang violence. Most had seen friends or family members die, underscoring that the regimes of living youth enacted on the streets often raised as many ethical problems as they solved (Collier and Lakoff 2005). Ironically, the moral logic of the gang both put youth at extreme risk for harms (including mental health issues as a result of violence witnessed and perpetrated), and gave them a sense of being untouchable, often for the first time in their lives. “One of our friends got stabbed in the heart four times and had a brick dropped on his head in North Vancouver,” Connor told me on another occasion in another MacDonald’s restaurant. “Maybe thirty seconds later his brother fought his way through to him and then he died in his brother’s arms, right? He was killed with like ten of us around him. At that point in time, my friend dying wasn’t glamorous – but it kind of was I guess? It was the fact that the police had to phone an emergency response team to keep all of us who came down to kill those other guys in order. You know, you can’t mess with us. We got an army behind us. That was glamorous for us at that point in time. We were untouchable, you know? After my friend was killed, I was on a high for the longest period of time.”
Jail

Because the young men in this study were not the top players in gang hierarchies, and therefore by no means untouchable, their criminal activities inevitably landed them in jail. Half of the youth who participated in this research had spent time in jail, and this included all of the young men who indicated that they had a history of gang involvement.

In general, youth’s experiences and understandings of incarceration were complex. Cycling in and out of jail powerfully intersected with the sense of getting lost in the city and going nowhere I described in the previous chapter. Jail could be just one more in a long line of places where youth found themselves sitting around and killing time (Raposa 1999). “Another criminal charge, another jail sentence, another chunk of your life gone,” Brittany stated bluntly in 2011, in response to my question about what she had been doing since I last saw her in 2008. She had recently done six months in jail for stabbing someone during a robbery.

On more than one occasion, Raymond made a connection between cycling in and out of jail in the present, and the state-orchestrated dislocations he had endured as a child after he was removed from his family home on the Rez. “I’m not an evil person, right?” he emphasized to me in 2010. “I can shut that [violence] off any minute, right? I can shut a lot of things off. But when I’m in jail, I think about, uh, how I had no freedom, when I was a kid. It’s just, the feeling of being” – he searched for the word – “controlled. I don’t like that. It reminds me of things and I become
violent. I kinda think about, like, you know, my family more when I’m in jail, right? As every minute goes by, I’m thinking about them.”

For some youth, jail was experienced as a continuation of the social suffering they had experienced across their lives. For others, time in jail could be experienced as an amelioration of that suffering. A number of youth confided to me that a part of them wanted to be in jail, and similarly, that in the past they had been “better off” in detention facilities than childhood homes. In relation to the violence and instability they experienced outside, the structured routine of incarceration was comforting. “I was fourteen when I went to jail for three and a half years,” Jordan reflected in 2012. “I was in twenty-two hours a day lockdown. Yeah. It was for kids that are – well my cellmate was – do you remember the Taber high school shooting? The kid that shot all those students in Taber high school? That kid was my cellmate for fucking years.” He continued, “I think I was so tainted and scarred emotionally when I was a kid that [being in jail] didn’t really bother me. Probably the best thing that could have happened to me was getting away from my family and especially my dad, who was the most sadistic fucker you can imagine. Anyways, got out. Went back in cause I reoffended and – yeah, I was a pretty bad kid when I was younger. I tell you what though, when I got out I didn’t want to get out.”

“Explain that to me a bit more,” I prompted.
“Like, I wanted to go back. I still, in a way, kind of do? In a way I’m scared of jail, and I don’t want to go back to jail. But I do want to go back to jail.“

“What is it about jail that makes you want to go back?” I asked.

“The seclusion, the-the-the – what’s the word for that? Being confined to – just the daily routine. Every day’s the same, being in jail. You control everything. I have to be able to control myself cause if I can’t control myself it’s like –” he didn’t finish his sentence. While a feeling of being “controlled” inside sent Raymond into violent rages, Jordan longed for it.

Exits

“I sit back everyday and I regret,” Steven told me in 2012. He was once again homeless and staying at a shelter in the Downtown Eastside. “It’s not like they say it is in rap videos or movies and shit. It’s a lot more painful. Although the whole bling bling [money] thing is there – then it’s gone. People are down here for money, drugs and fame, man. Money, drugs and fame. It’s not worth it though.“

At a certain point, most of the young people who participated in this study vowed to leave drug dealing and gang-related crime behind. The realities of life once they were released from jail or had spent all of their money on drugs were a stark contrast to the glamorized world of crime youth seemed to enjoy describing. A number of young men seemed to be haunted by the violence they had witnessed
and perpetrated, and/or paralyzed by paranoia (Contreras 2009). They could not shake the feeling that the police were onto them, or that other players were coming after them and their drug dealing turf. Terry was never able to shed the sense that he was about to die. “Even now, especially when I go out to Burnaby to where I used to live [in foster care], I have this really strong gut feeling that I’m gonna get stabbed by someone,” he told me in 2012. He was reflecting on a photograph of a cemetery he had taken a few weeks earlier (Figure 18). “And they’ll just leave me there alone to die.”

Reflecting on their circumstances in 2012, young men generally emphasized the extent to which they had been manipulated by higher-ranking gang members – and/or blamed themselves for their current circumstances (Grekul and LaBoucan-Benson 2008). “I manipulated myself. I used myself,” Paul reflected, “I think it’s about what you’ve been through in your life, though, too. Like, I’m not saying if you’re rich, you’re immune, but say you have something that happened when you were younger. Nine times out of ten you’re born into some bad shit going on at home, right? You’re low income, because your mother or father’s doing this, or they’re recovering from that – you know, life fucked them over some way or another, right? And then think about how much easier it is to recruit somebody that had the shit kicked out of them as a kid. When you’re sitting there and you’re thirteen years old, living in a shady-ass ghetto neighbourhood and angry as hell, and then somebody’s like, ‘You can work for eight dollars an hour, or you can make
a thousand dollars a day cash under the table, no taxes’? ‘Look kid, you come with me and do what I say when I say it, and I promise you nobody will ever fucking touch you without repercussions again.’ That kid’s gonna be like, ‘Where are we going? Who the fuck do I need to kill?’ You know, like, that’s all it takes. We both get something out of this, and I’m finally safe. Of course he’s not mentioning to the thirteen year old kid, ‘You might end up in jail for the rest of your life at one point.’” Paul added after a while, “And before you know it you’re in a box with a jury reading out your verdict, and suddenly your life’s not yours anymore.”

By the time young men were engaging in these sorts of critical reflections, permanent criminal records had often undermined the “legitimate” options available to them to “get ahead” in the city (Baron 2001; Pager 2003). Youth found themselves in a situation in which they were stripped of the opportunity to obtain meaningful career employment, and at the same time resistant to accepting the low paid, often temporary work that was available (Adler 1993; Baron and Hartnagel 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Baron 2001; Mains 2007). “You pretty much have got no options,” Terry reflected on that day in 2011, as we were on our way back to Vancouver from Delta. “Cause if every employer in the whole Lower Mainland [Greater Vancouver] is just like, ‘Get out,’ then obviously I can’t even go to Starbucks and get a job, right? As someone who has a record and has walked in there and used heroin in their washroom over the last however many years. If I was to walk in there and be like, ‘Hey, here’s my resume’ – and I have a pretty good
resume, right? They probably wouldn’t even look at it. Basically, the only way you can make it is if you can find a job with someone who’s like, maybe been on the outskirts? And if you come to work, and you take their shit, and you don’t stop except during the break – if you can handle that you can get ahead, maybe. I’ve had jobs like that, but I was just putting up with so much shit. It’s not the job you want, it’s a job you have to have, right? Doing a temporary job it’s like, I’m only doing this for a day and I’m not making very much money. But having an actual job would mean doing things that you like doing.”

Youth tried to sound defiant in rejecting available work. However, it was not hard to sense the extent to which they were trying to avoid the humiliation of aging out of the street youth job action program (which happened when they turned 25), or failing to compete for even an entry-level job (Bourgois 1996; Baron and Hartnagel 1997; Baron 2001). Moreover, young people were aware that their chances of moving beyond these entry-level jobs were slim. Such employment represented a hollow opportunity, offering little in the way of material benefits and the kinds of progress youth envisioned for themselves in the city (Baron 2001).

Alternatively, a number of young people expressed future aspirations that far outstripped their current circumstances, education levels and training (Sterk 1999). They described grand plans to start million dollar businesses or go to university. While the present dystopic moment is in many ways marked by the end of blind
faith in free market capitalism and the “American Dream,” and a post-Occupy awareness of the vast disparities that exist in the world, a number of youth clung to the belief that Canadian society is a *fair* society, in which, if they would only “pull their lives together,” they would have the same chances as anyone else to become “whatever they wanted” (Young 1999; Baron 2001; Agnew 2006; Sassen 2007). I sometimes pressed youth to explain the more practical aspects of these grand plans – where they would enroll for school, who was available in their lives to help them achieve their goals – and offered to help them myself, but my inquiries were rarely met with detailed responses (Bengtsson 2012). Many youth seemed to prefer to imagine that they were on the verge of “getting clean,” getting a “real” job, and getting a “real” place, rather than begin to take the series of small steps (e.g., finishing high school, accepting low paid work) that would be required in order to work towards larger goals (Mains 2007). Those youth who did enroll in the necessary education or training programs, or even began the process of looking into these programs, often became overwhelmed and gave up (Baron 2001).

In this context, success in the risky but potentially lucrative alternative economy could ultimately be viewed as preferable to the shame of accepting a job “no one else wanted,” or failing at high school (Baron and Hartnagel 1997). In the beginning of 2012, Paul and Connor were living in an SRO in the Downtown South, and half-heartedly trying to get work with a brick laying crew down by English Bay. “I’ve had numerous offers to go back to work [drug dealing] though,” Paul confided
proudly, eager for me to know that at any moment he could be back on top in the world of crime. “I’m still getting them. I don’t know. Offers are getting really good. The last offer I had, buddy showed up in the nicest car, dressed in his nicest clothes, and then made me an amazing offer. I told him no though. I don’t want to do it.”

Later in our conversation though, he admitted, “I tried writing a resume. There’s nothing on it, right? The only job I probably could get would be working for people in their ‘legitimate’ businesses, but that are still a part of the organization [gang] I was working for. And there’s always strings attached to that, right?”

By the end of that year, Paul had returned to drug dealing and crime, after he and his girlfriend had a baby.

Conclusion

Labour – that is, the practices through which people obtain the material resources necessary to produce and reproduce their everyday lives – plays a crucial role in the making of the material and symbolic landscape of the city. Conversely, the urban landscape structures labour in important ways (Harvey 1990; Lefebvre 1991 [1974]; Gordillo 2004). It has been forcefully argued that in cities like Vancouver, large-scale structural changes to the urban economy have created a permanent class of under- or un-employable youth locked out of the mainstream occupational structure (Baron 2001; Richardson, Wood et al. 2008). The manufacturing jobs that might once have allowed disadvantaged youth to move into
reasonably paid employment are mostly gone, replaced by flexible (i.e., temporary), low paid positions that offer little in the way of meaningful advancement (Harvey 1990; Sassen 2007; Pitts 2008). To move on from these low paid positions now requires a massive leap in educational attainment and job experience. In this context, it is the alternative economy that may ultimately provide these youth with jobs (Sassen 2007).

Among the young people who participated in this study, the alternative material and moral economies of Vancouver’s street-based drug scene allowed them to make money, assert hierarchies, wield reputations, and orchestrate various other achievements and defeats, in ways that would not have been possible for them in the formal economy (where many would have been able to acquire low paid temp work at best). To an extent, involvement in street-level drug dealing and low-level, gang-related crime mediated their social, spatial and economic exclusion in the city. Dealing and crime allowed young people to engage with the politics of place in Vancouver in ways that had previously only been imagined – they found themselves in-place in high-priced condos, nightclubs and designer clothing stores not normally open to “people like them” – for a time, at least.

Just as they were marginalized within the mainstream economy, however, the youth who participated in this study were also marginalized within the alternative economy. Young men were recruited by higher-level players, often at a very early
age, to engage in the most risky and least lucrative aspects of drug dealing and gang-related crime (Maher 1997; Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008). Childhood experiences of instability and exclusion led young people to embrace a particular moral logic of the gang and the regimes of living it engendered. In hindsight, most realized that it was their willingness to do so – even if this meant jail time and a permanent criminal record – that allowed those higher up to avoid risking risk altogether. The inevitability of youth’s incarceration in the context of this study betrayed how illusory any sense of social spatial mobility in the city really was. As a result of going to jail young people often “lost everything,” which could precipitate periods of intense drug use and homelessness (leading some to wish that they were back in jail; Maher 1997; Levitt and Dubner 2005). The reputations, statuses and loyalties they had worked hard to cultivate on the streets could not be translated into the forms of capital that would allow them to actually transcend their marginality – by entering mainstream worlds of school and work, for example (Bourdieu 1986; Fitzgerald, Dovey et al. 2004; Pitts 2008). Rather, the regimes of living youth enacted often embroiled them in the violence, out-of-control drug use and legal troubles that further reinforced their exclusion (Bourgois 1996; Baron 2001). Many rose to glory in the world of street-based drug dealing and crime only to find themselves destitute once again, with nothing to show for their previous success (before he returned to drug dealing in 2012, Paul often joked that the only
thing he had left from that period of time in his life was a green Adidas track suit jacket).
Figure 16 Untitled
Figure 17 Untitled
Figure 18 *Untitled*
Figure 19 *Untitled*
Figure 20 *Untitled*
Figure 21 *Untitled*
Chapter 7

CONCLUSIONS

Multilocality and multivocality in a “local” drug scene

The purpose of this research project was to complicate how we think about places like a local drug scene, as well as the personhoods of the young people who inhabit them (Gordon 2008). Much previous work focused on street youth populations – including my own earliest work – is premised on assumptions about a relatively bounded, discrete street youth community, that can be mapped onto a bounded, discrete neighbourhood like Vancouver’s Downtown South or Downtown Eastside (Appadurai 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). In Chapter 4, I used young people’s complex understandings and experiences of community on the streets to begin critically unpacking some of those assumptions. In Chapter 5, I moved away from the language of community to focus on youth’s more complex negotiations of belonging and becoming in the city over time, exploring these senses of place in relation to wider geographies of power and possibility, exclusions and desires. In Chapter 6, I situated youth’s involvement in street-level drug dealing and low level, gang-related crime within these wider geographies-in-motion, and focused on how

labour structures (and is structured by) the urban landscape in particularly powerful and enduring ways (Gordillo 2004).

This research demonstrated that places, and voices, are local and multiple (Rodman 1992; Robertson 2007). It provides yet another challenge to conventional theorizing of locality as a bounded, geographical location, and illustrates the ways in which lived experience continually escapes our social categories and analytics (Massey 1994; Raffles 1999; Gordillo 2004; Biehl and Locke 2010). The “local” Vancouver drug scene cannot be neatly contained within locations like the Downtown South and Downtown Eastside, nor can young people’s voices be easily encompassed by the notion of a drug user or street youth “community,” “subculture” or “identity.” Rather, I have shown that young people inhabited a lived world of a multiplicity of spaces and subject positions (Massey 1994; Biehl, Good et al. 2007). Even “never leaving” a particular physical geography like the Downtown Eastside was a dynamic experience, in which senses of place and self were continually made and re-made through interactions and acts of remembering and imagining that extended beyond that location, into hometowns and the Rez, high-priced condos and white picket fence homes (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Gordillo 2004).

Anthropology’s tendency to incarcerate our research subjects in static localities, (sub)cultures, communities and identities – a tendency that continues in much of the
writing about “street youth” and “drug users” – is particularly problematic when we are talking about young people who describe the structural, symbolic and everyday violence of “going nowhere” and “getting lost in the city” (Clifford 1988; Malkki 1997; Garcia 2010). My research attempted to simultaneously evoke these understandings, experiences and affects, while resisting a portrayal of young people as permanently locked into one moment, subject position or place. Following others (Petryna 2002; Biehl and Locke 2010; Garcia 2010), I have attempted to bring into view the constellations through which life chances are foreclosed, and highlight the lines of flight and escapes that, in certain moments, have the potential to transform lived experience (Deleuze 1997; Deleuze 2006). In the city, marginal places like the Downtown Eastside were the site of symbolic violence, in which a sense of being in-place and at-home could be embodied by young people and intersect with regimes of living like the “junkie” who has, or will inevitably, “hit rock bottom.” However, my research illustrated that this neighbourhood did other symbolic work as well. On the streets, young people were engaged in home-making projects – even if “homeless” – that reflected their desires for alternative horizons of possibility, belonging and becoming in a world city (Sassen 2007).

Characterizing the relationship between place and “risk”

It is now well established that place is an important social determinant of health (Macintyre, Ellaway et al. 2002; Kawachi and Berkman 2003; Dunn, Frohlich et al.)
In particular, previous work has demonstrated that growing up in a neighbourhood with fewer resources and opportunity structures increases young people’s risk of adverse health outcomes over time (Yen and Kaplan 1999; Yen and Kaplan 1999; Diez Roux, Merkin et al. 2001; Kohen, Brooks-Gunn et al. 2002; Latkin and Aaron 2003; Macintyre and Ellaway 2003; Cradock, Kawachi et al. 2009). However, the dialectical relationship between place and “risk” – and what constitutes “local” places themselves – is complex and defies easy analysis.

Collectively, my findings provide insights into some of that complexity for a group of youth in the context of a street-based drug scene in Vancouver, during a particular historical moment. Merging phenomenological perspectives with a focus on processes of political economy and power, in this thesis I have attempted to move beyond descriptions of context to theorizing context (Duff 2007). That is, I have attempted to show how various social spatial landscapes-in-motion come to exert such powerful and transformative effects on young people’s life chances through the practice of everyday life in places like Vancouver’s inner city (De Certeau 1984; Duff 2007).

This study has illustrated that, on the streets, youth were continually performing acts that expressed and reproduced their sense of place in the city – performances that were inextricably tied up with their own understandings of who
and what they were in particular moments (“street youth,” “junkies,” “urban citizens,” “gangsters,” “girlfriends,” “boyfriends,” “mothers,” “fathers,” etc.; Basso 1996; Robinson 2000). Among youth, senses of place, and of self, were multiple, oftentimes contradictory and subject to continual revision over time. In Chapter 4, I described how sense of place could encompass a valued sense of community in downtown Vancouver, and the symbolic violence of belonging in a “junkie” space like the Downtown Eastside. In Chapter 5, I showed how it could incorporate being-at-home in one of “The Best Places on Earth,” and the structural violence of entrenched social, spatial and economic marginalization in the city. In Chapter 6, I illustrated that it could include being in the center of an elaborate material and moral economy of drug dealing and crime, and the everyday violence of getting lost to incarceration, tremendous physical harm and even death. These understandings, experiences and affects were orchestrated into various regimes of living and personal trajectories that, in different moments, reflected states of excitement and boredom, capability and inefficacy, hope and hopelessness (Biehl and Locke 2010). Importantly, they intersected in compelling ways with the scripting of drug- and crime-related “risk taking” over time (Mayock 2005).

Vancouver’s street-based drug scene, and youth’s place in it, were not just characterized by contradictions – they were produced by them (Soja 1989; Lefebvre 1991 [1974]; Gordillo 2004). The contradictions and tensions that produced this locality were embedded in larger matrices of power and political economy, which
extended into the intimate geographies of young people’s childhoods and imagined futures, as well as global geographies of neoliberal markets and the war on drugs (Harvey 1990; Massey 1994; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Ong and Collier 2005; Brown, Shoveller et al. 2013). This research demonstrated how exclusions that often began in infancy could play out across young people’s lives as everyday, symbolic and structural violence. However, youth were not merely subject to larger matrices of power and political economy, and the contradictions and “risks” these engendered. They enacted “risk” (or what we might label risk) and reproduced exclusions and the micro-logics of power through the practice of everyday life in particular places. Crucially, their enactments of “risk” on the streets of Vancouver (e.g., dealing and using drugs, doing crime) were often bound up with desire – a desire for things to be otherwise, or with a pained sense that they never could be for “people like them.”

Applied ethnographic research is never straightforward, politically, theoretically or practically (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). However, the implications of this work for young people warrant attention. Youth between the ages of 16 and 24 are one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population in Canada (Karabanow, Carson et al. 2010). Young people’s analyses of their everyday experiences, both in the context of Vancouver’s street-based drug scene, and stretching back to the places where they grew up, point to several ways in which we could prevent or alleviate some of the social suffering described in these pages. A focus on place is productive in this sense, because although places are
assemblages of disparate scenes, practices, relationships and desires, they are also points of stability – we recognize them as reserves, high schools, foster care homes, youth drop-in centers and neighbourhoods. Attention to the complexity of places like a “local” drug scene, and the complex personhoods of the young people who inhabit them, shows us that there is no single answer to questions of how alternative forms of belonging and becoming might be meaningfully enabled in the margins. Rather, it highlights the need to take a range of actions that could make a difference across young people’s lives, and the wider geographies they implicate.

Recommendations

In Chapter 4, I illustrated how the language of community could obscure the multiple and sometimes contradictory ways in which young people envisioned and attempted to enact belonging in Vancouver, as well as the highly unstable and violent nature of social networks on the streets. The language of community is highly attractive, as is the potential for empowerment, capacity building and cultural appropriateness that community often implies. It is for these reasons that community-based, peer-driven and social network approaches to intervention are

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20 Most basically, community-based interventions refer to those conducted within the drug user community, often but not always by members of the community themselves in collaboration with an outside organization (the extent and meaningfulness of this “collaboration” can vary significantly, from near self-governance to tokenism). Peer-led or peer-driven interventions can fall within this broader category of community-based approaches, but refer explicitly to those interventions in which members of the drug-using community are involved in the conceptualization, design and delivery of the intervention (Broadhead, Heckathorn et al. 1995; 1998; 2002). Finally, social network interventions can also fall within the categories of both community-based and peer-led interventions, but refer specifically to those that utilize drug users’ existing social networks to extend the reach and effectiveness of harm reduction initiatives via both proscriptive and descriptive means (in other
increasingly viewed as *de rigeur* for promoting harm reduction among urban drug-using populations (Grund, Blanken et al. 1992; Broadhead, Heckathorn et al. 1995; Broadhead, Heckathorn et al. 1998; Broadhead, Heckathorn et al. 2002; Needle, Burrows et al. 2005; Goldberg-Freeman, Kass et al. 2007; Des Jarlais and Semaan 2008; Latkin, Donnell et al. 2009; Degenhardt, Mathers et al. 2010). Although such approaches are distinct, all three are premised on assumptions about the natural boundaries of a “drug user community,” and the degree to which it is characterized by relatively stable and positive social relationships (which, if utilized effectively, can facilitate the reduction of “risks” and harms among otherwise “difficult to reach” populations). While not discounting the utility of these designs in many settings – including the Vancouver setting – my findings suggest that such approaches may not be a panacea. In particular, this research illustrates that social network interventions aimed at extending the reach, legitimacy and effectiveness of harm reduction initiatives (e.g., Latkin, Forman et al. 2003; Latkin, Sherman et al. 2003; Sherman, Sutcliffe et al. 2009) may be incongruent with the complex ways in which these networks are actually structured, experienced and utilized by young people living and working in the margins of the city. For example, among the youth who participated in this study, social networks were used everyday to “track down” young people and administer violent punishments. Youth therefore often went out of their way to be “everywhere” and “nowhere” in the city. Moreover, my findings

*words, via what others in your network say you should be doing, and what others in your network are doing, respectively; Latkin, Foreman et al. 2003*).
illustrate that social networks on the streets were highly unstable and shifting due to the cyclical nature of incarcerations, hospitalizations, drug binges and the need to “lay low” periodically in order to avoid violence. Interventions that rely on these networks may therefore miss large numbers of youth, be unable to connect them with services in an enduring way, and in the worst case, may actually exacerbate harms.

My findings also demonstrate that harm reduction and public health interventions aimed at “the community,” particularly those located in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, may exist outside of the “normal” lives young people envision for themselves in the city, and may not be attractive even to older youth (i.e., those between the ages of 25 and 30). For some of the young people who participated in this research, a sense of belonging in this adult “community of clients” seemed to reinforce their marginality, and problematic subject positions like the “junkie” or “crackhead” who is “going nowhere” in downtown Vancouver (Radcliffe and Stevens 2008; Roe 2009/10). The ways in which services, organizations and agencies create subject positions remains an important consideration as young people and others call for more and improved access to medicalized services, which have been shown in some settings to have a de-stigmatizing effect for those young people who would rather receive services in “normal” or “mainstream” healthcare settings (Radcliffe and Stevens 2008). My findings also resonate with previous arguments that services and programs should not be focused solely on risks, harms and dis-
abilities, but also on creating space for alternate subjectivities beyond stigmatizing labels like “junkie” and “crackhead,” and also “IDU,” “at-risk,” “street youth,” “homeless,” “no fixed address,” “difficult to reach” and “client” (Dovey, Fitzgerald et al. 2001; Karabanow 2004; Malins, Fitzgerald et al. 2006; Rhodes, Watts et al. 2007).

However, young people’s adamant rejections of available harm reduction and public health services in certain moments must be contextualized within the unique service landscape of downtown Vancouver – where these kinds of rejections are only made possible by the fact that young people do have access to harm reduction supplies and public health facilities. While we have witnessed the gradual withdrawal of the welfare state in Canada, somewhat paradoxically downtown Vancouver is the site of a relatively well-funded and innovative social service infrastructure focused on street-based drug users and the urban poor. In a setting where basic harm reduction needs have largely been met, young people’s critiques arguably have less to do with the utility of specific programs than with the fact that many desperately want out of this community of clients, but instead often have the feeling that they are becoming increasingly entrenched in it (Radcliffe and Stevens 2008; Mayock, Corr et al. 2012). Young people’s critiques highlight the limitations of this service landscape in addressing underlying issues of material deprivation, joblessness and social spatial exclusion in the city (echoing academic arguments that harm reduction has shifted from an oppositional, activist platform for addressing the material and social conditions that frame drug-related harms, to a professional,
apolitical platform for managing and promoting health within “risky” populations and places; Roe 2009/10; Roe 2005). The youth who participated in this research seemed to be saying that what they needed was training, education, jobs and a home – a way out of the social, spatial and economic marginality they had experienced across their lives – more than they needed additional harm reduction and public health services (which, while aiming to prevent harms in the short term, may actually sustain systems of harm in a larger sense; Roe 2005; German and Latkin 2012). More harm reduction and health services will not necessarily result in a more humane society (Roe 2005). Arguably, what is needed in order to meaningfully address social suffering in this setting is a broader policy response, which reunites “harm reduction” with a direct critique of the larger systems of power and political economy that create harm, and takes seriously the need for larger scale structural change (Kleinman, Das et al. 1997; Rhodes 2005; Roe 2005; Blankenship, Friedman et al. 2006).

In addressing the needs of young people who are already street-entrenched, this would begin with the creation of accessible, affordable and acceptable subsidized housing that allows for varied and graduated models of independent living (e.g., some highly supported, some family-focused, some supported on a needs-only basis). Working in partnership with the British Columbia social housing agency, the federal and provincial governments have poured millions of dollars into the renovation and restoration of 13 provincially-owned SROs in the Downtown
Eastside (Ley and Dobson 2008; BC Housing 2010). But, for the young people who participated in this study, SRO accommodations in the Downtown Eastside (refurbished or not) existed outside of the home-making projects they longed for in Vancouver. In fact, “ending up” in these accommodations was consistently equated with “giving up hope” on ever re-entering mainstream society in meaningful ways, and could intersect with both symbolic and everyday violence (Krusi, Fast et al. 2010).

Housing is arguably crucial to stabilizing young people’s lives so that they can pursue more long-term opportunities for education, employment and recreation (Karabanow 2008; Mayock, O’Sullivan et al. 2011). However, the role of employment as a means of stabilizing young people’s lives should not be underestimated (DeBeck, Wood et al. 2011; Richardson, Sherman et al. 2012). Employment is widely recognized as a determinant of health, but when it comes to young people who use drugs the role of employment in promoting wellbeing is often subordinated to other concerns (Richardson, Sherman et al. 2012). The results of this research highlight the central importance of meaningful labour market participation in the futures and forms of urban citizenship youth imagined for themselves in the city. Circumstances of unstable housing, intensive drug use and deprivation meant that most of the youth who participated in this project would not have been able to enter directly into desired forms of conventional, “nine-to-five” employment – but nor were they generally satisfied with low-threshold job programs that involved picking up
garbage and removing graffiti, for example. Programs and services that focus on creating work opportunities for youth must therefore include a consideration of what constitutes meaningful work for young people, as well as varying levels of job structure and requirements, ranging from low-threshold, part-time jobs that provide an entry into work routines and responsibilities, to full-time, conventional labour market participation (Richardson, Sherman et al. 2012). Previous work has highlighted the potential utility of pairing youth with local professionals, business owners, unions and post-secondary institutions, in order to provide them with apprenticeships, job training and learning-based projects (depending on their interests; Bridgman 2001; Bourke 2003; Karabanow 2004; Willging, Quintero et al. 2011). In order to be effective, however, these kinds of approaches must include mechanisms through which youth can advance from low-threshold programs to sustainable and secure employment. Access to short-term work, training and education programs, in the absence of opportunities for advancement, may have a deleterious rather than beneficial effect on youth, who are already generally skeptical that “the system” can work for “people like them” in any meaningful and lasting way.

Just as pleasure should not be erased from public, policy and academic discourse about illicit drug use, nor should it be erased from discourse about “intervention.” My findings underscore the role played by boredom and a lack of pleasure in undermining youth’s efforts to “pull their lives together,” both on and
off the streets. For example, even when youth had succeeded in securing housing (and in some cases, enrolled in school programs), they generally lamented the lack of enjoyment in their day-to-day routines. In the absence of subsidized and supported opportunities for recreation and relaxation, youth often found themselves “sitting around” on welfare, or “doing everything they were supposed to do” (staying clean, going to various appointments, working on school) but, as Amanda described, without a sense of pleasure or reward from these actions. Even when they were clean, youth did not have the disposable income to “reward themselves” or “unwind” in the ways that so many of us take for granted in a city like Vancouver (where, as youth rightly pointed out, there is so much to see and do). Previous work has highlighted the role that sports can play in fostering capabilities that go beyond athletics, and in engendering meaningful forms of civic engagement (Brown 2010). Connecting youth (including older youth) with local community centers and programs located both within and outside of the downtown core – by proving transportation to and from open gymnasium drop-ins, for example – could allow some young people to begin enacting desired forms of belonging in the city, which the findings of this study emphasized included enjoying opportunities for recreation and relaxation (Karabanow 2004).

My discussion in Chapter 6 underscores the everyday violence and other forms of social suffering (e.g., frequent incarceration) that accompany involvement in street-level drug dealing and low-level, gang related crime in the Vancouver setting.
This research supports a growing consensus that the international system of criminalization of drug use has failed to meet its basic objectives, and produced an array of negative consequences (Global Commission on Drugs 2011). These include dramatically inflating the price of drugs on the streets, and thereby perpetuating involvement in drug dealing and crime by those both at the bottom and higher up in socioeconomic hierarchies. In Vancouver and elsewhere, criminalization allows gangs to flourish and higher-level players in the drug dealing game to prosper, in part by providing an endless stream of new recruits on the streets and in prisons. These potential recruits weigh the risks of (repeated) incarceration and a criminal record against the rewards offered by the world of crime (which, this research has shown, are not limited to money). Many conclude, initially at least, that the latter outweigh the former. Comprehensive drug policy reform is urgently needed. Indeed, several countries have experimented with alternative models of decriminalization and drug regulation (Millar, Jones et al. 2008; Hughes and Stevens 2010; Uchtenhagen 2010). Consistent with the recommendations of a recent report by the Global Commission on Narcotic Drugs (2011), these models should be further explored and assessed regarding their potential impacts in the Vancouver setting, with an eye to their consequences for young people living and working on the streets.

The current emphasis on the enforcement of drug laws has arguably resulted in “policy displacement,” whereby other, more evidence-based strategies remain
under supported (DaCosta 2008; Global Commission on Drugs 2011). The negative effects of such displacement are especially apparent within youth populations. In British Columbia and Canada, we have seen millions of tax dollars diverted to the enforcement of ineffectual drug laws and anti-drug advertising campaigns (Geddes 2010; Werb, Mills et al. 2011), when the evidence suggests that early developmental interventions are the most effective way to mediate future drug- and crime-related harms among youth (Toumbourou, Stockwell et al. 2007; Elman 2012). For example, in the United States, a follow up at age 27 with young people who were enrolled in the 2-year Perry Preschool program (which provided intensive supports for low-income children and families) found lower rates of substance use, as well as higher levels of school completion, fewer arrests, lower percentages of individuals receiving social assistance, and higher monthly earnings among those who had participated in the program, when compared to members of the control group (Schweinhart and Weikart 1993). In general, it has long been recognized that the progression to harmful forms of drug use and crime can be moderated by programs delivered through the school years to improve home, school and neighbourhood environments, and reduce social exclusion (O'Donnell, Hawkins et al. 1995; Eddy, Reid et al. 2000).

The findings of this research speak to the importance of adopting a life course perspective in order to meaningfully address the most harmful forms of street-based drug use and crime among youth in the Vancouver setting (Elder 1985; Hser,
Longshore et al. 2007; Toumbourou, Stockwell et al. 2007). As young people attempted to make sense of their lives in the context of this research project, they referenced numerous “critical moments” or “turning points” during their childhoods. For example, youth highlighted the multiple moves they had endured as children and teenagers – whether as a result of getting kicked out of homes, running away, or being forcibly relocated by the state – in shaping experiences of “ending up” on the streets. Approximately half of the youth who participated in this project endured these dislocations while in the care of the government. Two-thirds of youth had experienced violence and abuse early in life, including while in government care, which often intersected with youth’s dislocation from (multiple) childhood homes (Turpel-Lafond 2012). The instability and violence most experienced growing up, combined with learning difficulties and mental health issues in many cases, caused almost all of the youth who participated in this study to leave school early – only 15 of the 71 youth I interviewed had completed high school (Ministry of Child and Family Development 2010/2011; Turpel-Lafond 2013). As highlighted in previous work (Shoveller, Chabot et al. 2011; Elman 2012), aging out of government care was another critical moment identified by youth. Many suddenly found themselves without a place to stay, and dependent on meager social assistance payments. There are supports available for youth between the ages of 19 and 24 in British Columbia, including a Youth Education Assistance Fund and a new Agreements with Young Adults program, but both are conditional on going to
school or working full time. The youth who participated in this research were not able to access these programs before becoming street-entrenched in Vancouver; once they were on the streets, unstable housing, material deprivation, complex mental health issues and/or drug use made it difficult to meet the conditions for these forms of support. Moreover, by the end of my study period, many youth had aged out of the 19 to 24 age group as well, and had few options for supports beyond the adult-focused social service infrastructure in the Downtown Eastside.

Drawing on a life course framework of analysis, being uprooted, childhood abuse, dropping out of school and aging out of government care may have represented “sensitive periods” more than “critical moments” in young people’s lives, in that the damage resulting from these traumatic life events could have been ameliorated by appropriate supports. Indeed, the provincial government has made promises to address the state of crisis that a large number of young people find themselves in while growing up in British Columbia (Woolley 2013). However, many advocates would argue that the financial and managerial resources needed to meaningfully address this situation have not been forthcoming thus far. Instead, significant cuts to funding in the public school system have led to a significant decline in the numbers of specialist teachers and support workers in both elementary and secondary schools (British Columbia Teacher's Federation 2013). It is these teachers and support workers who arguably have the potential to coordinate supports in schools, neighbourhoods, and homes for youth in crisis, and the
dedicated time to work with youth on keeping them connected to schools and
neighbourhoods in meaningful ways (Turpel-Lafond 2012). A recent report also
highlights the “unacceptable” state of youth mental health services in British
Columbia, largely as a result of funding cuts (Turpel-Lafond 2013). Concerns with
the delivery of mandated services by the British Columbia Ministry of Children and
Family Development have been ongoing in the province for several years (Hughes
2006; Elman 2012; Turpel-Lafond 2013); however, the gravity of the situation was
recently underscored by a report that explored the circumstances surrounding 89
incidents of attempted suicide and self-harm (Turpel-Lafond 2012). In general,
British Columbia has consistently had one of the worst overall poverty rates, one of
the highest child poverty rates, and one of the most unequal distributions of income
among rich and poor families with children in Canada (BC Child and Youth
Advocacy Coalition 2012).

Consistent with recommendations put forward by the British Columbia
Representative for Children and Youth and others (BC Child and Youth Advocacy
Coalition 2012; Elman 2012; Turpel-Lafond 2012; Turpel-Lafond 2013; Turpel-Lafond
2013), my findings point to the urgent need for government action and investment of
adequate resources to address the needs of the province’s most vulnerable young
people. These youth have vastly inadequate access to the forms of capital (including,
but not limited to, economic capital) needed to “get ahead” or even get by. Namely,
my findings support arguments for a legislated poverty reduction plan in British
Columbia, which includes things like tax reforms to reduce income inequality, raising the minimum wage and welfare rates, and the expanded provision of quality social housing (BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition 2012). However, while policy changes like raising welfare rates are essential (so that individuals are able to even reach the poverty line as defined by Statistics Canada), they are not enough. Young people must be consistently supported across the life course in developing the other forms of capital required to succeed (Bourdieu 1986; Abel and Frohlich 2012). These include the skills needed to navigate mainstream institutions like schools and workplaces, as well as various kinds of group memberships. They also include belief and trust in “the system” – that is, the feeling that one is a valuable member of society who is, in turn, supported by that society. Fostering the accumulation of multiple forms of capital among youth, in a way that consistently supports positive health outcomes and reduces health inequities, arguably requires things like investment in the public school system, to ensure that specialist teachers and other support workers can be present in every school (Turpel-Lafond 2007; British Columbia Teacher’s Federation 2013); adequate resources to develop and implement a full continuum of mental health services for youth, from acute care needs through to self-care supports (Turpel-Lafond 2013); extending the age at which youth age out of government care, in order to facilitate young people’s transitions into independent living, school and employment situations (Elman 2012); and finally, the improved coordination and monitoring of youth-focused services.

**Capturing life as it is lived**

This research highlights the value of a longitudinal, ethnographic approach. In particular, it builds on previous work to highlight the value of incorporating performative methods into an ethnography of place (Irving 2007; Moretti 2008; Irving 2010). In the context of this study, walking tours and the development of photo essays created space for something new to emerge in relation to particular memories, life events and imagined futures (Irving 2007; Culhane 2011). These performative methods created space for youth to disrupt dominant discourses and conventions of representation with regard to young people who use drugs “on the streets” of Vancouver. It was particularly through the places they took me and the photo essays they created that youth unsettled the discourses and representations that would, for example, position them as out-of-place in a “nice” urban space like a community garden, in-place in a “junkie” space like an SRO, or as simply placeless (Madison and Hamera 2006).

This project brings into sharp relief some of the ethical perils of doing and writing ethnography. It must be acknowledged that in addition to creating space for youth to disrupt dominant discourses and conventions of representation, this
research was a part of the infrastructure and institutional gaze that positioned them as “street youth,” “at-risk,” “homeless,” and members of the community of clients many so desperately wanted to escape (Gurstein, Pulkingham et al. 2011). Youth were well aware that on some level this was just one more research project about those who are poor, “homeless” (even if housed) and “addicted” in downtown Vancouver. It was for this reason, perhaps, that so many of them asserted a strong desire to “singularize out” of the data – to show me that they were “not like” the rest of the young people they imagined were a part of this study (Amit and Dyck 2006; Gurstein, Pulkingham et al. 2011). The “emptiness” of the photographs included in this thesis, and my inability to attribute them to the photographer (except through their pseudonyms), raises questions about institutional ethical guidelines, as well as my own personal ethics, which allowed me to position youth as “homeless,” “addicted,” etc. throughout this thesis, but denied young people their own names and self-portraits. Finally, while this project was focused on young people’s desires for their circumstances in the city to be otherwise, in many ways my inclusion in the formal economy depended on their continued exclusion from the same (Biehl 2005; Culhane 2011).

Above all, I have attempted to write this thesis in a way that is mindful – to move away from using young people’s experiences as illustrative examples of theoretical concepts, and towards capturing the improvised quality of life as it is lived in circumstances full of tragedy (Biehl 2009; Garcia 2010). This thesis has not
been concerned with enumerating the “facts” of these young people’s lives, and using those facts to make authoritative claims about HIV infection rates, homelessness and drug use. Instead, it has aimed to bring to life the minor histories of one group of young people at a particular moment in time, that nonetheless addressed themselves to “big” questions of power and political economy (Ong and Collier 2005; Stoler 2009).

Throughout this study, the ethics of the research encounter had to be continually negotiated with youth in spite of and across difference (Powell and Stephenson Shaffer 2009). It has been argued that the negotiation of these kinds of messy encounters is the primary locus of meaning and value in contemporary ethnography, which is no longer solely about producing knowledge (Castañeda 2006; Culhane 2011). Achieving rapport, empathy and understanding in relation to the people we study have all been linked to the potential of anthropology to generate “more accurate,” “more truthful” and better data (Briggs 2004; Shuman 2006). And yet, given that power/knowledge mediates all aspects of the research encounter, a proximity of understanding between researcher and researched is a questionable, if not impossible, ideal (Foucault 1980 [1972]). This means that there are no quick fixes to the ethical dilemmas raised by this study (including the textual solution of self-reflexivity as a practice of “redemption”; Stewart 1996; Pels 1999; Weems 2006).
In this study, it was more productive, and arguably more ethical, to allow space for misunderstandings, mistakes and miscommunications – for the “frictions” that may ultimately allow people to work together across large differences in social positions (Tsing 2005; Culhane 2011). This was not always a comfortable process. In many moments, youth and I would try to seek common ground. For example, young people seemed to enjoy comparing urban geographies, and to gain satisfaction from pointing out all of the ways in which our itineraries in the city overlapped (or had overlapped in the past). In other moments, youth attempted to assert or create common ground more directly – by inviting me to parties and asking me out on dates, for example. When I declined these kinds of offers and reasserted the boundaries of our working relationship, the result was often considerable tension and a (usually temporary) breakdown of productive communication. Similarly, conversations in which we would compare aspects of our lives often ended up underscoring differences in our social positions – differences that stretched back into historical time, permeated the present moment, and would shape our respective futures (Culhane 2003/04). I could become a mirror of the worst kind for youth – I was close enough in age for them to compare their lives with mine, and become aware of all of the ways in which our circumstances differed. I owned an apartment in a “nice” Vancouver neighbourhood, an iPhone and expensive camera, and a car; I went to university and had a “real” job doing research. These were the things that young people desired, and wanted to believe that they were entitled to.
The fact that I had them, and they did not, could generate anger, sadness and resentment for youth – and “privileged” guilt for me.

However, these kinds of frictions were ultimately illuminating points of departure rather than closure. Misunderstandings – about the value of community on the streets, for example – took our conversations in more productive directions. Breakdowns in communication and the researcher-research subject relationship provided insights into what was most at stake for youth, in the context of this project as well as more broadly. Reestablishing communication and finding ways to talk, not only about the most sensitive topics of my research (e.g., young men’s desires for meaningful romantic relationships), but also about the research process itself (e.g., how the nature of ethnography could make it easy to forget that I was in their lives in my capacity as a researcher), created space for negotiation on both sides of the researcher-research subject relationship. It also brought into sharp relief the extent to which my research “findings” were contingent on such processes of negotiation. Accordingly, in this thesis I have tried to write against the search for decontaminated meanings and the “perfect text,” and to highlight instead the highly dialogical, improvisational, and contingent nature of research “data” (Stewart 1996).

Limitations

It must again be noted that the young people whose words appear on these pages are not representative of all youth who use, or have used, drugs on the streets.
of Vancouver. These findings are based on research conducted with one group of youth from January 2008 to January 2013. They should not be generalized even to all of the young people who participated in this study at all points in time. As described in Chapter 4, the street youth community in Greater Vancouver – if we are to speak of one at all – is complex and evades definition. My findings illustrate that it encompasses youth who describe themselves as growing up on the streets, as well as those sometimes referred to as Twinkies and Weekend Warriors – youth who are new to the scene and still, to varying extents, moving between the streets and another “home.” Undoubtedly, there are other forms of lived experience that were not captured by this research.

The youth who participated in this project are most representative of those who are highly street-entrenched, and engaged in the most extreme forms of drug use. It is notable that even the youngest participants had relatively extensive experience with drug use at the time of their earliest interview, and that almost all of the youth who participated in this study had experienced unstable housing and homelessness. It is also notable that at the conclusion of this study in January 2013, none of the 25 youth who were the focus of my ethnography had succeeded in “exiting” the street-based drug scene in the ways they had envisioned for themselves. While most had secured some form of housing, their everyday lives continued to be marked by material deprivation, boredom, unstable and dangerous living conditions (in SROs, for example), and in many cases, drug use. This study
therefore did not capture the experiences of youth who move in and out of the drug scene and never become drug scene entrenched (i.e., those who stay Weekend Warriors), nor those who are able to successfully “exit” the scene. Moreover, potentially salient factors such as ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender were not fully explored in my analysis, although it is clear that these social characteristics can intersect with other contextual factors to produce unique understandings, experiences and engagements with place in the Vancouver setting (Craib, Spittal et al. 2003; Shannon, Kerr et al. 2008; Wood 2008; Shannon, Kerr et al. 2009; Marshall, Wood et al. 2011; Miller, Fielden et al. 2011; Shannon, Strathdee et al. 2011).

**Future research directions**

This study points to several directions for future research. Consistent with the study limitations outlined above, future research should focus on elucidating the diversity of experiences within the population of young people who use drugs “on the streets” in Greater Vancouver. Namely, research should focus on following youth who are in the earliest stages of initiation into the street-based drug scene, those who continue to move back and forth between the streets and other homes without becoming drug scene entrenched, as well as those who have succeeded in exiting the scene. These lines of inquiry may be productive in identifying specific factors that mediate drug scene entrenchment, as well as those that could prevent this entrenchment in the first place.
Future research should also include gender- and ethnicity-based analyses. With regard to the latter, for example, research could explore Native youth’s understandings, experiences and engagements with the city as a (post)colonial space that is being continually “unsettled,” as various parties articulate competing claims to place and property both through and outside of the legal system (Blomley 2004).21 A gender lens of analysis is particularly pressing in the Vancouver setting, given the introduction of mandatory minimum prison sentences for non-violent drug offences by the federal government,22 and the potential decriminalization of sex work anticipated as early as 2013.23 My findings point to some of the ways in which structures like the war on drugs have the potential to exacerbate gendered experiences of social suffering on the streets – sometimes in unexpected and unintended ways. For example, a war on drugs and crime that targets young men in many ways constituted a highly gendered moral logic of the gang, which, among other things, positioned already marginalized youth as in-place inside jails (as “honorable criminals” or “heroic gangsters”). Simultaneously, however, this gendered moral logic is what made it possible for young men to cultivate the

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21 Several First Nations lay claim to the land upon which Greater Vancouver now sits.
22 In late 2012, the Safer Streets and Communities Act came into effect, which replaces conditional and flexible sentencing with mandatory minimum sentencing for certain drug offences (including low-level marijuana offences). The Act also allows for the pre-trial detention of young people accused of property crimes, and orders the court to consider seeking an adult sentence for young offenders aged 14 and older convicted of murder, attempted murder, manslaughter and aggravated sexual assault (http://ccla.org/omnibus-crime-bill-c-10/).
23 In 2012, the Ontario Court of Appeal struck down Canada’s prostitution laws, finding that Criminal Code prohibitions against keeping a common bawdy house (brothel) and living on the avails of prostitution were unconstitutional in their current form. The Supreme Court of Canada is scheduled to hear the case in the summer of 2013 (http://www.ontariocourts.on.ca/decisions/2010/december/2010ONCA0814.pdf).
“connections” that allowed them to meet their material needs in ways that were generally not open to their female peers. Entrenched urban poverty resulting in homelessness, drug use and the urgent need to procure income could have especially adverse consequences for young women. On the streets, it was therefore protective (in spite of interpersonal violence within intimate relationships), and economically advantageous, for young women to align themselves with young men who were involved in drug dealing and gang-related crime. The war on drugs and crime reinforced the structural violence of young men’s entrenched marginalization, as they cycled in and out of jail (Mayock, Corr et al. 2012). This cycle could be even more disastrous for young women, however, as their relationships with young men were continually disrupted by the latters’ incarceration. Given the high level of control boyfriends generally exercised over their girlfriends’ drug procurement and use, the formers’ sudden arrest often meant that the young women left behind had to find a way to “make ends meet” (i.e., procure money, drugs and shelter) within a matter of hours (Fast, Small et al. 2009). The result could be engagement in the most risky forms of income generation – namely, street-based sex work – and/or rapidly transitioning into a new “relationship” in order to have a place to stay and access to drugs for the night. New relationships formed in this way were often accompanied by new patterns of drug use (since young women generally had to accept whatever their new male partner was willing to provide), and new exposures to violence (Fast, Small et al. 2010).
Finally, although the findings of this study have implications for intervention and policy, I did not seek to systematically evaluate young people’s experiences and engagements with existing programs, services or agencies (in fact, I purposely bypassed agency- and service-based access to research participants, and distanced myself from service locations in an effort to avoid alienating those young people who had been repeatedly kicked out of and banned from them). Future research could focus exclusively on youth’s experiences and understandings of social network interventions and network-based recruitment (also referred to as respondent driven sampling), for example, including the potential harms and methodological limitations presented by these approaches. Moreover, it is anticipated that two new youth-focused supportive housing complexes will be operational in Vancouver by late 2013. A longitudinal ethnographic investigation of different kinds of housing environments, as well as transitions in housing among youth, is an important focus for future research.

Endings

“I can’t even believe I’ve been coming here that long,” Steven said, shaking his head. He was referring to the ARYS office, where we met in 2012 to do a final in-depth interview before I began the process of writing this thesis. I had asked him if he planned to pursue construction work, remembering that we had talked about
that when we first met in 2008. “That was a long time ago,” he continued, sighing. “One day you wake up and it’s like an instant four, five years later.”

During our final conversations as a part of this project, a number of youth became visibly frustrated and sad, as they realized what kind of “ending” their story would have in the context of this thesis. These reactions highlight a normative tension inherent in longitudinal, ethnographic research that takes as its central concern the trajectories of those who are “trapped” in the social, spatial and economic margins (Gurstein, Pulkingham et al. 2011). My ethnography was inevitably concerned with change or progress through time – or lack thereof. Over the course of my study period, youth both commented that they enjoyed “checking in” every few weeks or months because it allowed them to “track their progress,” and talked about how it was painful to reflect on their lives in this context because it underscored the extent to which they were still somehow “stuck” or “going nowhere.” For some youth, watching me progress through my PhD program had the effect of emphasizing their own deficiencies (they commented on how I was “getting so much more accomplished,” even though “we were almost the same age,” and did not seem to be comforted by my insistence that my successes had everything to do with the various advantages I had enjoyed since childhood). Ultimately, I was accessing the lines of social mobility from which they were largely removed (Spivak 2004; Culhane 2011).
In spite of some youth’s sentiments to the contrary, however, these are stories without clear endings – including in the context of my own research. At the time of writing, I continue to follow up with many of the young people who participated in this project in my capacity as a research coordinator with the ARYS project. As young people enter their mid-to-late twenties and early thirties, I will continue to track both the conditions of possibility that prevent them from “pulling it together” – from getting a place, getting a job, getting their kids back, or simply getting out of downtown – and the various ways in which they challenge “our” assumptions about the limitations of life in the city for “people like them” (Biehl and Locke 2010).

This research raises important questions regarding who has a right to the city and its public spaces, and what that right might look like (Mitchell 2003; Attoh 2011). In Vancouver, young people who are homeless and use drugs “on the streets” are seeing their right to public space all but eliminated, as a result of numerous state-sponsored initiatives aimed at excluding and criminalizing those deemed to be outside of what is aesthetically and morally acceptable in public space. These range from intensified policing and the introduction of mandatory minimum drug sentences, to increased surveillance of both “nice” and “problem” areas of the city via security cameras, to the installation of new fare gates at SkyTrain stations in an attempt to crack down on fare evasion (which, in the absence of adequately subsidized public transportation, will likely have the effect of further incarcerating certain “kinds” of youth in certain “kinds” of urban neighbourhoods).
This thesis juxtaposes young people’s right to be present in the city with their right to be absent from spaces characterized by everyday and symbolic violence. It speaks to youth’s right to meaningfully inhabit the urban landscape through school, work, recreation, leisure and home-making, rather than simply having the choice between finding a place to sleep on the streets of the Downtown South or in the alleys of the Downtown Eastside. In Vancouver, a private property regime based upon the right to exclude increasingly renders invisible the plurality of legitimate claims to place in the city (Razzaz 1993; Blomley 2008). Dominant privatization narratives attempt to erase young people’s claims to place, or something like an urban “commons” – that is, spaces to which they are entitled as inhabitants of the city (Klein 2001; Blomley 2004; Blomley 2008). Their place-based claims are instead increasingly framed through the language of charity and paternalism (Culhane 2003/04). Homelessness is viewed with sympathy – as something that it is “good” to prevent – and displacement as perhaps even beneficial for “those kinds of people” (or at the very least inevitable, given the realities of rising property values in the city; Blomley 2008). These framings represent an ethical and moral failure, however, particularly when we view the city of Vancouver as a (post)colonial space in which claims to land ownership are far from certain (Blomley 2004). Alternatively, by recognizing young people’s right to places of dwelling, work, learning, recreation and relaxation (perhaps by re-envisioning certain public and private spaces through the frame of the commons), we may begin to create the foundation for a more
broadly envisioned and inclusive public in Vancouver, in which everyone can contribute to the making of the city.
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