Clusters of Voices: Dialogic Literary Social Activism in
Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, 2000 - 2010

by

Erin Janette Ramlo

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Abstract

In this thesis, I draw on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of dialogism and polyphony to discuss recent literary representations of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. I consider the explosion of literary representations of the area over the 2000 – 2010 period in light of the complex social challenges at work in the community at the time. I begin with a brief overview of Bakhtin’s interrelated concepts of dialogism, polyphony and heteroglossia. I then provide an abridged Downtown Eastside history and consider what the drivers might be to increased representation of community in Vancouver’s cultural imagination in this decade.

Comparing two non-fiction texts narrated by community members, *Hope in Shadows* and *In Plain Sight*, I argue that dialogism can activate a complex web of interaction between readers, editors, and authors that advocates for community engagement and an associated redefinition of pervasive, stigmatizing narratives about the Downtown Eastside. I then turn to the dialogic representational strategies at work in Marie Clements’ play *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, paying particular attention to the formal features of the text that activate dialogism, including multiplicity, intertextuality, and double-voicing. I argue that the play is a pointed critique of a monologic culture of oppression, as it speaks back to the long history of murdered and missing women from the area. The play advocates for the potential of dialogue, connection and community as alternatives to the repeated social and institutional silencing that has lead to the marginalization and deaths of so many women. Ultimately, I argue that the Downtown Eastside’s dialogic texts are instances of voiced resistance to the ongoing material, physical, and cultural silence of the community’s members. As such, they constitute acts of ‘literary social activism,’ or, literature that advocates for social change.
Preface

This thesis is original, independent, unpublished work by the author, Erin Ramlo.
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For Bryce
Chapter 1 - Introduction

...for it is from our
prophetic, courageous, conflictual, and loving
unity
that our community
raises shit
and resist...

- Bud Osborn, excerpt from “raise shit - a downtown
eastside poem of resistance” (2001)

Between the year 2000 and 2010 twenty-four books were published about Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside community (Figure 1.1). Consider that, in the twenty-five years previous, a total of only nine books were produced that specifically engaged with the area.¹ This recent explosion of Downtown Eastside literature raises compelling questions, not the least of which is: why? What were the drivers to increased representation of the Downtown Eastside community in Vancouver’s cultural imagination over this decade? What strategies do the texts use to represent this complex community? Who produced them? With what intentions? And, what do the texts, individually and as a body of work, convey about the community?

In this thesis I will consider some of these broad questions by examining three texts from this period in detail: Hope in Shadows, In Plain Sight, and The Unnatural and Accidental Women. Considering these three texts in light of the complex challenges at work in the community over the 2000 to 2010 period, I will propose one particular way of reading the recent literature of the Downtown Eastside: through its insistence on dialogue. Following Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of narrative voice in the novel, I will consider how these three texts, in particular, employ dialogic representational strategies to engage multiple voices and perspectives

¹ This includes books that were published and publically accessible; see Figure 1.1 for titles and dates.
Figure 1.1 Downtown Eastside Books, 1975 – 2013
about the community simultaneously. I argue that these dialogic texts are instances of voiced resistance to the ongoing material, physical and cultural silence of the community’s members. As such, they constitute acts of what I am calling ‘literary social activism,’ or, literature that advocates for social change. Eleven of the twenty-four books published over the 2000 – 2010 period employ vocal metaphors and dialogue as central concerns. Across genres from novels to short stories, from social service documents to community newsletters, from theatre to the poem that opens this thesis, a concern with being audible and ‘having a voice’ reverberates through the literature of the community. By ‘having a voice’ I mean the ability to be acknowledged, recognized, and validated through one’s words, whether written or spoken. I also mean ‘having a voice’ to signal the presence of advocacy, as in ‘raising one’s voice in protest.’ For, residents of the Downtown Eastside often face a systemic network of institutional and cultural silence that serves to marginalize them. Disenfranchised due to physical, mental, social, or economic status, the ability to give voice to one’s position (to one’s self, to one’s opinion’s, to one’s perspective) has not often been the experience of many community members. For some, this silence has played an enduring role in their lives – from childhoods attenuated by trauma or displacement, to the ongoing effects of colonialism, to silence and shame about addictions or poverty, to the silence engendered by living in a community that is

2 The eleven texts that employ dialogic elements are: Dead Girls by Nancy Lee (2001); The Heart of the City: The Best of the Carnegie Newsletter, edited by Paul Taylor (2003); Missing Sarah: A Vancouver Woman Remembers Her Vanished Sister by Maggie DeVries (2003); The Unnatural and Accidental Women by Marie Clements (2005); In Plain Sight: Reflections on Life in Downtown Eastside Vancouver edited by Leslie Robertson and Dara Culhane (2005); Skids by Kathleen With (2006); Hope in Shadows edited by Brad Cran and Gillian Jerome (2008); A Thousand Dreams: Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the Fight for its Future by Larry Campbell, Neil Boyd, and Lori Culbert (2009); RAISE SHIT!: Social Action Saving Lives by Susan Boyd, Donald MacPhearson, and Bud Osborn (2009); In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction by Gabor Maté (2009); and Speaking for a Long Time: Public Space and Social Memory in Vancouver by Adrienne Burk (2010). I will discuss these texts in more detail in the latter sections of the introduction.
deeply stigmatized and ostracized. The cluster of texts produced between 2000 and 2010 make the voices of this subjugated community more audible on the social and cultural registers as they proliferate outside the bounds of the community itself, raising voices in resistance to marginalization and in the service of social justice through dialogue.

1.1 A Note on Terminology

Before turning to more detailed discussions of the Downtown Eastside’s history and the dialogic nature of its current cultural production, I would like to first pause to make some important comments about terminology. As will become clear over the course of this thesis, many things are contested in the Downtown Eastside, and perhaps not surprisingly, the politics of naming is chief among them. Regarding terms and definitions used in this analysis I have let my intuition guide me. While this may not seem like sound methodology for an academic analysis, in the context of a space as contested and stereotyped as the Downtown Eastside, I think it is important that we critically develop (and feel comfortable with) our own relationship to the terms, as the vocabularies we employ always and inevitably carry a semantic legacy. For example, most people colloquially refer to the Downtown Eastside as ‘down here’ – ‘I moved down here when I was seventeen,’ one might say, or, ‘most people down here have addictions’ etc. While this is a term that community members themselves employ, it is rife with the hierarchical social position that the neighbourhood has been relegated to. For me, using this term is almost akin to granting semantic assent to the spatial and ideological conception of this community as lesser-than others, and as such, I have tried to strike it from my vocabulary.³ Similarly, I find the acronym often used to describe the community (the ‘DTES’) flattening and

³ Use of the term by community members may also imply just how deeply they have internalized their marginality; the term could be construed as a tacit acceptance of their place as ‘other.’
homogenizing. While many organizations working in the neighbourhood employ it, partly, I assume, for ease of report writing, I find its drive to condense the community quite limiting, and have elected to use ‘the Downtown Eastside’ throughout this thesis instead. Otherwise, I tend to rely on the terms ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘community’ to describe the area, as I respect their gesture towards the Downtown Eastside’s deeply knit social and human bonds. I will, however, periodically refer to ‘the area’ or ‘the space;’ this is not intended to ignore the human element, but rather, to gesture towards issues of contested boundaries, as I will discuss in more detail below. Use of ‘members of the Downtown Eastside community’ is similarly employed for the sake of semantic care. I consider ‘members of the community’ to include staff of service organizations or other people who similarly frequent the area (or have in the past) and have some investment in the community. It is important to note, though, that the term is not meant to categorize people or invoke any one definition of what a community member looks like. Downtown Eastsiders are as diverse as the members of any other neighbourhood, perhaps more-so, as will become more clear in the discussion of the area’s history. One particularly slippery term that I will employ in the coming pages is ‘humanize.’ I intend it to mean the process by which the Downtown Eastside’s dialogic texts elucidate the details of people’s lives in order to promote familiarity and recognition. By definition, however, the term carries a legacy of colonial disenfranchisement that implies the opposite of my intended use. Perhaps ‘non-dehumanizing representations’ more accurately describes what I see occurring in these texts, but this is a rather unwieldy term. As such, I will still invoke the term ‘humanize,’ by which I mean representations that challenge the stigmatizing and de-humanizing narratives that are often told about this community. My comfort with certain phrases or terms has been developed self-consciously over the years, both in my personal interactions with the Downtown Eastside community, and, more
empirically, as I have combed through hundreds of works that somehow discuss or reference the area.

For the sake of clarity, it is also important to define exactly where I mean when I say ‘the Downtown Eastside,’ as its spatial definitions are almost as contested as its ideological ones. Some define the Downtown Eastside by its postal prefix, others by the Census agglomerate areas that make up its core, while others use more anecdotal definitions, based on an accepted or perceived public imaginary. For my purposes, while I see the boundaries of the community as continually in flux – physically, due to gentrification, and conceptually, due to the dialogic crossing of boundaries that I will argue for – I employ a geographic definition of the Downtown Eastside that is generally accepted by social service organizations and the City of Vancouver. As such, this thesis defines the community borders as running from Richards Street in the West to Clark Drive in the East, and from Prior and Venables Streets in the South to the water’s edge in the North. This area includes the sub-regional neighbourhoods of Chinatown, Strathcona, and touristic Gastown, as well as the corner of Hastings and Main, or, what service organizations have recently been calling the ‘Core Downtown Eastside.’ The popular imagination of the community’s challenges of homelessness, addiction, and crime all centre on this corner and an approximately five-block radius around it. I do not mention these streets and neighbourhoods in order to establish cartographic certainty or to pin the Downtown Eastside to any particular spatial definition. Rather, I employ them to help me – and readers, by extension – sketch out a broad understanding of what is considered ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the community. While I do not like to draw such imperatives, issues of membership, access and, conversely, exploitation are always inevitably at play in representations of the Downtown Eastside. Establishing whether something comes ‘from’ the neighbourhood, or has been written ‘about’ it, is an important discursive step in
analyzing any piece of cultural production that references this space. This is not to say that only people who reside within the delimited boundaries can represent the Downtown Eastside, but merely to state that it is important to critically reflect upon the spatial and social conditions from which the narrative of a particular individual emerges and consider how their inflections contribute to the overall discussion about the community.⁴

1.2 Theoretical Framework: Bakhtin, Dialogism, and Social Activism

Central to my conception of how the multi-vocal Downtown Eastside texts operate are Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of literary voice, particularly his terms monologism, polyphony, and dialogism.⁵ For Bakhtin ‘voice’ includes the stylistic features of an individual’s expression – the “height, range, [and] timbre” (1984, 293) for example, of a voice – as well as their associated “worldview” (293). According to Bakhtin, when a person enters into dialogue with another he “participates in it not only with his thoughts, but… with his entire individuality” (293). When many voices relate, dialogue, and disagree, in the bounds of a given text Bakhtin calls this polyphony: a series of voices, “a plurality of consciousnesses, each with equal rights and each with its own world [that] combine but are not merged” (6). Bakhtin contrasts this idealized form of discourse with its antithesis: the monologic. “Monologism, at its extreme” says Bakhtin, “denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights” (292). It is the oppressively one-note language of authoritative or absolutist discourse. By formally resisting the

⁴ See Linda Alcoff’s “The Problem of Speaking for Others.”
⁵ Bakhtin’s concepts are inherently fragmentary, due to the nature and time of his writing. As has been cited by many before me, in order to try and grasp his concepts, it is necessary to turn to several of his texts and combine their definitions, as the nuances of his intertwining theories of heteroglossia, dialogism, and polyphony are sometimes ill defined or contradictory. Bakhtin sketches out the main tenets of polyphony, monologism and dialogism in The Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics, while more detailed theorization of dialogism and heteroglossia can be found in his essay “Discourse in the Novel” in The Dialogic Imagination. My thinking about Bakhtin has been greatly helped by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson’s Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics and Sue Vice’s Introducing Bakhtin. This discussion has also been informed by many secondary sources: see Cavell, Grace, Helms.
monologic, polyphony implies and enacts resistance to dominant and established narratives. Yet voice, for Bakhtin, is not merely a device – a series of people speaking does not necessarily equal polyphony. The achievement of true polyphony (which is an ideal state of discourse) is mediated by the extent to which a given text, or utterance, is dialogic. For Bakhtin, our words are part of an ever evolving, socially and politically inflected ‘living language;’ no word, utterance, or text can be separated from its socially constructed legacy of meaning, nor can it be thought of as a static entity divorced from the social position of the speaker. This always essential referentiality of any utterance is captured in the term ‘dialogism.’ Dialogism is defined by Michael Holquist as “the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (426). Further, “a word, a discourse, language or culture undergoes ‘dialogization’ when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, [and/or] aware of competing definitions of the same things,” whereas “undialogized language is authoritative or absolute” (427). According to Bakhtin there are both centripetal and centrifugal ideological forces at work that mediate our experiences of language and representation, and can lead to either undialogized or dialogized discourse, respectively. Centripetal forces attempt to reinforce the status-quo, limit the dialogic nature of communication, and push language toward a static and immutable centre – the monologic. While discourse generally inclines itself towards the monologic, the centrifugal forces of discourse can be put to work in the service of destabilizing that monologic imperative. Various dialogic strategies are part of this diffusive centrifugal practice, whereby discourse is diverted to the margins and the edges, and multiple, competing and equally valid discourses exist.
‘Dialogue’ in Bakhtin’s vocabulary is not the simple act of speaking between two people – although, a conversation could be considered dialogic, given certain conditions. For Bakhtin, use of the word dialogue signals the process (or processes) through which dialogism is activated. Dialogue, then, can be a speech act, or a written sentence, or a single word, or a whole text that somehow comes into dialogue with both itself and something else. Dialogism is the always enduring referentiality of utterances, and thus, the opposite of the prescribed and foreclosed statements of monologism. Bakhtin’s ‘dialogue’ is not about passive reception; it is about active movement and engagement to the point where all consciousness is autonomous but related in a dialogic exchange, and thus, in its ideal state, polyphonic.

Bakhtin isolated several techniques that can incline an utterance toward the dialogic, including multiplicity, double-voicing and hybridization, carnivalization, parody, and embedding (or, what we now generally call intertextuality). Sherrill Grace has called these tactics “strategies for actualizing dialogism” (119). Note the constructivist nature of these dialogic strategies: the activation of dialogism does not necessarily occur on its own, rather, it is actively sought through the form, layout, and themes of a text in order to encourage centrifugal diffusion of discourse, thus opening up new thinking, new dialogue, and ultimately, provoking change. For Bakhtin, given that all language is socially produced and has socially embedded meanings and definitions, those meanings and definitions can continually be altered – or (re)produced, or (re)generated – through the process of dialogism. It is important to remember, though, that dialogism begets (and is a precondition of) polyphony – multi-voicedness on its own is not necessarily indicative of centrifugal and/or dialogic forces at work. Rather, we must be attentive to the ways in which dialogism is crafted, applied and implied through our discourse strategies in order to assess
whether or not polyphony – and its associated potential for liberation from the monologic imperative – is at work.

For Bakhtin, monologism and polyphony are two extremes of the same pole. In between them lies dialogism, which can expand our thinking and open up pervasive binaries. It is important to remember, though, that these concepts exist along a continuum. In practice, our discourse moves somewhere between the poles of more or less dialogic, while monologism and polyphony, in their pure forms, likely do not exist. Similarly, while Bakhtin’s work has long been employed in the service of political resistance, it is important to note that in Bakhtin’s own writing the relationship between monologic and hegemonic discourse is only implied. Bakhtin was writing from a position as an exile of Stalinist Russia, and thus couched his criticisms of social discourse in a discussion of narrative ones. A general concern with the search for truth, however, and destabilizing the totalitarianism of monologic discourse, is perhaps not surprising given Bakhtin’s own social position. Drawing on a Socratic model of dialogue, Bakhtin discusses how “the dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed to the official monologism, which pretends to possess a ready-made truth” (110, italics in original). He is critical of any single entity defining or imposing meaning. For Bakhtin, “truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching” (110, italics in original) for it through dialogue.

While I recognize that there has been much criticism of Bakhtin’s work over the years, I find his theories useful in as much as they allow me to make the practical – but incredibly complex – conjunction between voice, a text, the imbedded structural features of that text, and the social context of that text’s production. Bakhtin’s work, though, has been criticized, in part, for this kind of over-applicability. Since his writing came to prominence in the West in the
1980s, his terms have variously been applied and appropriated by almost every discipline in the humanities and social sciences, often to contradictory ends. This ‘cult of Bakhtin’ has lead to very valid criticisms of his work. Some call it utopian, others contend it over-simplifies complex discursive relations and social conditions. For my purposes, I am interested in the critical possibilities that Bakhtin’s theories open up. I follow other critics like Gabrielle Helms, whose book *Challenging Canada: Dialogism and Narrative Techniques in Canadian Novels* applies Bakhtinian theory to ask productive questions about how dialogic strategies might challenge dominant narratives about this country. Helms considers how certain recent Canadian novels “give voice to those previously silenced and resituate those cast as outsiders, thereby exposing the myth [of Canada] as an innocent nation and challenging its hegemonic centre” (3). This is the spirit in which I employ Bakhtin’s work in the following chapters. By applying a dialogic reading to the literature of the Downtown Eastside, however, I do not intend to foreclose other readings of these texts or to impose any static definitions upon them. Part of the beauty of reading for dialogism is in its intent to open up discussion rather than pin it down. I see the dialogic as just one way, among many, of looking at (and hearing) the Downtown Eastside’s texts and how they operate.

My thinking about the Downtown Eastside’s literature has also been informed by more contemporary theories that discuss the individual and social function of speaking, telling, and narrative. It is well established that literature can help us think differently about social conditions or historical events. From historiographic metafiction to Aboriginal literature and storytelling, to post-colonial theory, I think it is fair to say that we often look to stories to deploy challenging, even revolutionary, discourses. According to social movement theorists, telling stories or crafting counter-narratives are key activities in activism for social justice. The collection *Telling Stories*
to Change the World, for example, presents a series of case studies from all over the world, wherein groups mobilize activist movements by articulating and reclaiming stories about their communities. The editors discuss how these activist movements are “insisting on the power that stories have to generate hope and engagement, personal dignity and active citizenship, the pride of identity, and the humility of human connectedness” (Solinger, Fox, and Irani 1). Similarly, a central guiding principle of my idea of ‘literary social activism’ is Gary Allan Fine’s assertion that “without shared and communicated culture, sustained collective action is impossible” (230).

Aligning a little with Bakhtin, Fine contends that “discourse shapes identity and action” (230), and that articulating narratives is a key component of this discursive construction. I understand and apply ‘storytelling’ here in a broad sense of the term, one that includes fiction and non-fiction, literature and theatre, as well as the stories that circulate in the popular imagination. I mean ‘storytelling’ to signal ‘the stories we tell’ about ourselves and others, and in particular, the stories that are told about Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Combining these ideas with Bakhtin, in the coming chapters I hope to demonstrate that the stories we tell about the Downtown Eastside are important, as they shape social perceptions of the community and its members. Drawing on Susan Sontag, however, I am cognizant that, no matter the intention of a particular piece of cultural production, “no ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” (7). While Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of Others concerns itself with photography in particular, her discussion of the ethical valences of representing suffering are instructive for the analysis that follows. For example, she writes: “photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply bemused awareness…that terrible things happen” (13). According to Sontag, though, narratives are a key component in ethical representations of suffering, as “narratives can make us understand” (89).
Still, Sontag warns about “rote ways of provoking feelings” (80), particularly sentiments like pity and compassion. While part of the power of the Downtown Eastside’s stories lies in their ability to mobilize affect, we must be attentive to the ways in which that affect is elicited, employed, and to what ends. While these considerations do not have definitive answers, an awareness of the ethical concerns about representations of the lives and stories of already marginal individuals must be at the forefront of any analysis of the community’s cultural production.

1.3 A Brief History of the Downtown Eastside

This area was officially given the name ‘the Downtown Eastside’ in the mid-1970s, at the urging of a newly formed activist group in the community, the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA). Before then, this approximately two square kilometer space along Vancouver’s industrial waterfront was known simply as skid row – home, for decades, to those on the margins of Vancouver’s population. This space, however, was not always on the margins; rather, the inception of the now sprawling metropolis known as Vancouver occurred right here. In the 1860s it was called Granville, a small settlement on the edge of the wilderness, until the

6 This all too brief outline of the Downtown Eastside’s history is informed by many sources, Larry Campbell, Neil Boyd and Lori Culbert’s extensively researched A Thousand Dreams: Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the Fight for Its Future was chief among them. It is an invaluable resource for anyone hoping to understand the political, ideological, and historical complexities of this space. Graeme Wynn’s Vancouver and Its Region, and Chuck Davis’ The Greater Vancouver Book were very helpful in contextualizing the Downtown Eastside in relation to its neighbours, while the Introductions to Hope in Shadows and In Plain Sight provided abridged histories of the community. See also Stan Douglas’ 100 Block West Hastings and Charles Demers’ Vancouver Special. Interestingly, in Vancouver histories that precede the year 2000, there are very few references to the Downtown Eastside. If there are, they are usually focused on the Downtown Eastside Residents Association. For example, the only explicit reference to the Downtown Eastside in the index to Chuck Davis’ The Greater Vancouver Book: An Urban Encyclopedia, published in 1997, is for an entry written by Jim Green, then president of DERA (862). This omission of the Downtown Eastside demonstrates just how voiceless the community has been in the cultural imaginary of this city, given that Davis’ Encyclopedia was touted as the definitive historic and social document of its time. The book included essays from Vancouverites of all sorts about their neighbourhoods (of which the Downtown Eastside wasn’t one); its essay on “Crime” however makes repeated reference to the neighbourhood as the main haunt for drug addiction and prostitution, but never actually refers to the community by name.
CPR decided it was the ideal place to set up the western terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The community was centered around industry, not only did the railway end here, but it became the port that connected Atlantic and Central Canada with Asia. The area, then still densely populated with forest, was the home of the Hastings Mill, which ran along the waterfront at the foot of what is now Dunlevy Street, in the heart of the Downtown Eastside. This is where the lumber for most of the city’s early buildings was produced and the path along which logs were skidded in by horse to be milled – hence Hastings Street’s moniker of ‘skid road.’ The Granville settlement was also the site of the city’s first saloon; Gassy Jack’s the Globe opened in 1867, the very first building erected in the area – or so the mythos of the neighbourhood’s history goes. Many historical studies focus on the long history of depravity and vice that attenuated this industrial community from its inception, but it is important to remember that this was the basis of Vancouver’s history, not just that of the Downtown Eastside.

As the city grew, Vancouver’s core services moved on to other, more westerly, parts of the city, and the Downtown Eastside edged towards marginality. Chinese labourers brought to Canada to work on the CPR established Chinatown on the western edge of the Downtown

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7 The origin and accuracy of this skid-road/skid-row anecdote have been difficult to trace; it seems almost too mythic to be true and has become ubiquitous in recent histories of the neighbourhood. According to Robertson and Culhane in *In Plain Sight*, the area was dubbed skid-road due to the “corduroy roads dug to slide logs into the water” and it came to represent “a uniquely west-coast variant of ‘slum’ or ‘ghetto’ characterized by a preponderance of hard-drinking, hard-living single men who, until the 1960s formed the majority of the neighbourhood’s population” (17). Further, the term became part of the city’s lexicon – “those who stayed [in the Downtown Eastside] too long, or for whom alcohol and/or drugs became a focus of their everyday life… were said to have ‘hit the skids’” (17).

8 There is even a walking tour presented by the Vancouver Police Museum that guides you around this area entitled “Sins of the City.” The two-hour tour focuses on the bawdy frontierism of Vancouver’s inception and capitalizes on the area’s notoriety but does not discuss the community’s current challenges.

9 In his recent book *Vancouver Special*, Charles Demers uses the city’s roads as a metaphor for how the Downtown Eastside is perceived. Calling attention to a slight bend in the road – and a breaking of the otherwise rigid grid system of Downtown – that precedes one’s entrance to the Downtown Eastside (at Hastings and Cambie), he says: “It’s worth remembering that it wasn’t Gastown that changed, introducing an aberration into the grid – it was the city around it. And yet, I can be almost certain that most people would be inclined to blame the slightly awkward shift on the Downtown Eastside. Somehow, it must be their fault” (87).
Eastside, while Japantown was founded in the 1920s by migrant fishermen and ran along what is now Powell street in the middle of the community. Hogan’s alley, which was established as the enclave of African Canadians, and Strathcona, home to an ethnically diverse population of immigrants, made up the remaining parts of the community. The Downtown Eastside retained its industrial and ethnically diverse character for many years. Through the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, the Downtown Eastside became the commercial hub of the city – Hastings Street’s neon signs announced every kind of shop one could need, the route was dotted with restaurants and cafés, and you could see a movie at the Lux for a quarter. The neighbourhood was anchored by Woodward’s, the venerable department store built in 1902 at the corner of Hastings and Abbot that would become an iconic rallying point for the community in later years. Even with its working class roots, the skid-row designation was always applied to this part of town. From the 30s to the 70s, the Downtown Eastside’s population was mostly made up of elderly men, and retired, injured, or alcoholic resource workers who populated Hastings Street’s single room occupancy hotels (SROs).

In the 1970s a spirit of activism and community participation characterized the Downtown Eastside, as DERA pushed for social housing reforms and safety regulations in SRO buildings, and as all factions of the community rallied together to stop a highway that the province planned to run straight through the area into downtown. In the 1980s and the 1990s, however, in the wake of government cutbacks and a shifting social landscape, the area began to see an influx of other marginalized groups, and simultaneously, a weakening of its social services and resources. Vancouver’s longest running mental hospital, Riverview, began a process of deinstitutionalization, slowly cutting back services and discharging patients into community care (the communities, however, had little to no services in place to support them); most had
very little income from social assistance and were forced into now dilapidated SROs. In 1984, the City of Vancouver began a push to remove sex workers from Vancouver’s West End, displacing the industry to the ‘low-track’ of the Downtown Eastside. This rise in population and dearth of appropriate and affordable housing led to a rise in homelessness rates, as did the displacement of low-income residents caused by Expo 86. The fair grounds for the international Expo were just a few blocks west of the Downtown Eastside, as such, many hotels in the area evicted long-term residents in favour of a quick payday from the tourist market, leading to widespread homelessness not just during Expo, but in its wake, as landlords used the evictions as an excuse to increase rents.10

Over this same period, the neighbourhood also saw the influx of a more prevalent and potent drug scene that accompanied the advent of crack cocaine. While there had always been a history of illicit drug use and substance abuse in the Downtown Eastside – from Chinatown’s opium dens at the turn of the twentieth century to the rise of heroin use in the 1950s and 60s and the ubiquitous legacy of Hastings Street’s beer parlours – the influx of crack cocaine signaled a paradigmatic shift in the way drugs were used and sold. The drug was inexpensive and plentiful, it could be packaged in small single dose quantities, sold on the street, and was easily ingested. Addictions became more entrenched and many resident addicts oscillated between heroin and crack cocaine as co-supportive habits. In this period, the drug economy and social landscape of the community began to change, as drug sales and use moved out into the open and the prevalence of injection drug use spiked. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the area’s ongoing problems of poverty, homelessness, mental illness and the burgeoning drug scene were largely

10 See Michael Barnholden and Lindsay Mearns’ Street Stories: 100 Years of Homelessness in Vancouver and Graeme Wynn’s “Time to Grow Up? From Urban Village to World City, 1966 – 91” in Vancouver and Its Region (234 – 266).
ignored by governments, city officials, and the general public, in what former mayor Larry Campbell has called a “concerted neglect” (Campbell, Boyd, and Culbert 61) for the community. According to Campbell, Boyd, and Culbert the popular approach to the Downtown Eastside at the time was one of containment. Civic leaders were aware of the epidemic of hard drug use (evident by increasing rates of overdoses and HIV/AIDS infection), homelessness, and survival sex-work, and attempted to contain them to the Downtown Eastside community rather than implement social welfare strategies like social housing and harm reduction. The 1990s saw businesses move out of the area (Woodward’s closed in 1993), an open and visible drug market established at the corner of Hastings and Main, a sharp increase in the number of female sex-trade workers who had been reported missing, and in 1997, the declaration of a public health emergency due to the epidemic of HIV/AIDS infections in the area. In 1999 the Vancouver Police Department issued a poster that included the photographs of 31 women, all of whom had gone missing from the Downtown Eastside since 1978. Concurrently, the community was banding together through organizations such as VANDU (the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users, established in 1998) which advocated for funding for needle exchanges, among other things; the Portland Hotel Society, which advocated for social housing for hard-to-house members of the community; and the Pivot Legal Society who tried to establish fair practices and safe spaces for all members of the community, whatever their barriers to care may be.\footnote{These are but a few examples of several important service organizations that were at work in the community at the time (and that have continued to be, in the intervening years). Others include the PACE Society, the WISH Drop-in Centre, Lookout Emergency Aid Society, and the Triage Emergency Services and Care Society (now known as Raincity Housing).}
1.4 2000 – 2010: Contexts for the Emergence of Literary Social Activism

While there were many service organizations advocating for the community, the City of Vancouver faced challenges in implementing reforms for the area. In 2000 civic, provincial, and federal governments, led by then mayor Phillip Owen, signed the Vancouver Agreement, a cross-governmental recognition of the Downtown Eastside’s burgeoning challenges that allowed the city to implement a strategic plan to improve health and safety in the community. This led the way for the adoption of the ‘four pillar’ approach to drug reform in 2001, which included implementing prevention, treatment, law enforcement, and harm-reduction strategies in the community. In 2001 the Vancouver Police Department’s missing women’s poster was re-issued and updated, adding another 18 women who were missing. Eventually, a poster would be issued that included a total of 69 women who were reported missing from the Downtown Eastside over an approximately twenty-five year period. At this time, residents and social service organizations pushed for more resources from governments, and for more autonomy in management of the community’s complex set of challenges. The year 2002 proved to be a watershed year for the community: former coroner and harm-reduction proponent Larry Campbell was elected mayor of the city, paving the way for the opening of InSite, North America’s first supervised injection site, the following year. In February of 2002 the VPD/RCMP joint task force for missing women arrested and charged Robert Pickton with the first two of an eventual 27 counts of first-degree murder of women from the community. Also in 2002, hundreds of members of the community, homeless people and activists alike, took over

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12 I will return to a much more detailed discussion of the ‘Murdered and Missing Women’ and a reading of the poster that was issued by the Vancouver Police Department in Chapter 3.
13 In December of 2007, Pickton was convicted of six counts of second-degree murder. The crown eventually decided to stay prosecution on the remaining charges against him.
the old Woodward’s building for the WoodSquat protest, a nearly 100 day stand off with police and the provincial government over the proposed redevelopment of the site into market condos rather than social housing. Both gentrification of the neighbourhood and the spending associated with the upcoming Olympics (2010) fuelled fears about further marginalization of the Downtown Eastside’s already vulnerable residents in the lead up to 2010, instigating protests, marches, and further clashes with the status-quo between 2005 and the games, while the ongoing (and highly mediatized) saga of Pickton’s trial brought worldwide attention to the area until he was convicted in 2007.

This constellation of events conspired to bring increased attention to the neighbourhood, much of it derisive, and much of it deeply stereotypical. According to Leslie Robertson and Dara Culhane in the introduction to In Plain Sight, written in 2005, “a global public has come to know the Downtown Eastside and its residents through journalistic sensationalism” (18) and the detached language of official reports. Robertson and Culhane posit that there are two deeply connected themes that dominate most representations of the area, first “the exotic and shocking depictions of the illicit drug trade, commercial sex, and wanton violence and crime,” and second, the attempt to cast residents of the Downtown Eastside into essentializing categories, ‘the homeless’, ‘drug addicts’, and ‘prostitutes’ who are, according to mainstream media, “lazy, deviant, and individually to blame for the impoverished and often brutalizing conditions in which they live” (18).

Concurrently, though, a body of texts was emerging that challenged these categorical definitions of the community. The cluster of eleven dialogic Downtown Eastside texts published
between 2000 and 2010 speak back to, and destabilize, this legacy of outside representation. All of them, to a greater or lesser degree, employ auditory metaphors including voice, dialogue, and dialogism, with some more dialogically inclined than others. Gabor Maté’s treatise on addiction and the Downtown Eastside, for example, moves between chapters of medical exposition and narrative stories from his patients. The narrative passages are inset into the book as intertexts, becoming dialogically engaged with the medical and social discussion that surrounds them. Similarly, Sheila Baxter’s *Still Raising Hell: Poverty, Activism, and Other True Stories* is part memoir, part social history of the Downtown Eastside, and part activism. Photos, drawings, and documents are all pictured for readers; these sustained intertexts speak back to the narrative Baxter relates of her own life, opening up her history into a social one. Nancy Lee’s *Dead Girls* and Kathleen With’s *Skids* are two engaging examples of polyvocal fiction, in the form of short stories. Both collections craft a series of autonomous voices that speak about their own experiences of marginalization within and outside of the Downtown Eastside. *Heart of The City: The Best of the Carnegie Newsletter* edited by Paul Taylor anthologizes a selection of writing from Downtown Eastside community members. The book sets poems, fiction, editorials, and drawings beside each other, so that the voices of participants come to interact dialogically, often disagreeing, debating, and arguing through a particular topic or community concern. In *Missing Sarah: A Vancouver Woman Remembers Her Vanished Sister* Maggie Devries

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14 My choice to bound the analysis between 2000 and 2010 is not meant to imply that important (voiced) texts were not produced before, or since, but rather, to recognize that prior to 2000 there were fewer pieces of cultural production that specifically considered the Downtown Eastside. There are wonderful texts, however, that did. Specifically, I am thinking of Bud Osborn’s *100 Block Rock*, an anthology of poems published in 1999, which specifically deals with the Downtown Eastside, addiction, poverty and homelessness. In a poem entitled “Amazingly Alive” Osborn engages the vocal paradigm by calling for the community to “shout for joy/shout for love/shout for you/shout for us/ shout down this system/puts us in prison/say shout for life/shout with our last breath/ shout down this north american culture of death” (11). It is a beautiful and moving poem that advocates for the conjunction between voice and activism.
intersperses her own memoir narratives with the letters, poems and journal entries of her sister Sarah, who went missing from the Downtown Eastside in 1998. This distinct cluster of dialogic texts seems to recognize that a productive way to represent a space as complex and contested as the Downtown Eastside is in what Bakhtin would call a ‘multivalent’ approach. The writers and editors use a community of voices, multiplicity, and intertextuality to gesture to the complexities of the community and the inherent difficulty in capturing them.

In the chapters that follow, I will discuss an additional three texts that employ dialogism to portray the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood. In chapter two, I discuss two non-fiction texts narrated by community members, *Hope in Shadows: Stories and Photographs of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside* and *In Plain Sight: Reflections on Life in Downtown Eastside Vancouver*. I argue that a complex web of dialogical interaction is at work in these two texts that activates community engagement and an associated redefinition of pervasive narratives about the Downtown Eastside through personal stories. In Chapter three, I turn to Marie Clements’ play *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* and analyze its dialogic engagement with the community’s history of murdered and missing women, paying particular attention to the formal features of the text that activate dialogism. I argue that the play is a pointed critique of a monologic culture of oppression, as it speaks back the long history of social and institutional silencing that has lead to the marginalization and death of so many women. I have selected these three core texts for discussion, as they articulate a particular model for representation of the community: each advocates for interaction and dialogue as a potential site of redefinition; each does so through a formal implementation of the dialogic; each text allows the stories of the Downtown Eastside to move beyond the physical and conceptual boundaries of the neighbourhood; and each argues that literature can be a productive site for social advocacy.
I do not intend to imply that literature is some kind of magic salve for the community’s problems. Rather, I intend this analysis to acknowledge and celebrate the fact that, at least in these three texts, community members are responding to the Downtown Eastside’s long legacy of voicelessness by making spaces for the community to be heard through literature and cultural production. In as much as these works have been explicitly crafted to impart or engender a dialogue between insiders and outsiders to the community, they have the potential to create change by way of increased interaction, dialogue, and perhaps, understanding between the Downtown Eastside and those outside. However, I admit to reading the three texts under consideration through an optimistic lens. While I believe that they express activist intentions and have the potential to encourage redefinitions about the community, that is not to say that they will, nor that other dialogic representations would produce similar effects.

The abiding question my analysis raises is ‘Are these texts actually effective?’ in any kind of marked social way? One cannot know, really – at least not yet. The recent literature of the Downtown Eastside creates the conditions for previously silenced voices to speak, but that does not necessarily equate to being heard and understood, nor does it equate to action. For that, there must be people who are willing to listen and I’m not sure if that exists yet. For now, though, what the Downtown Eastside’s texts are enacting is enough; there is activism here – that much is clear by the scale of the trend and the conditions of its promulgation. Activism, by definition, doesn’t necessarily mean change, it means actively advocating for change and engaging in the preconditions that allow a movement towards it to occur. That is exactly what these texts achieve.
In the late 1990s there was a trend of taking high school students to the Downtown Eastside in police-guided tours to teach them about the consequences of drug use and addiction. At fifteen years old I was one of these students. We travelled from Victoria to Vancouver to experience two full days of the spectacle of these streets in the most surreal high school field trip I could ever imagine. I remember walking into an SRO hotel room, guided by two police officers, and watching as they woke the sleeping tenant and took a crack pipe from his bedside table to show us how it worked. The sleeping man’s name was Jeffery. As the policemen spoke, Jeffery struggled to wake up and make sense of the children standing in his room. The police officers asked Jeffery to tell us his story, which he did, kindly, but with halting confusion and obvious fear. I also remember our little group of middle-class students standing in a ring around a man named Ian as he sat on the sidewalk at the corner of Hastings and Main. I remember Ian’s defensive posture, his warning to ‘back off,’ and the police officers compelling him to talk. And, unexpectedly, I remember how Ian graciously invited us to sit on the sidewalk with him, refusing to say anything until we were all on the same level – police officers, students and teachers alike. Generously, Ian told us of his life, about heroin addiction, and about how he had come to live on the streets of the Downtown Eastside.15

15 In 1999 the National Film Board produced a documentary entitled *Through a Blue Lens*. This film followed Vancouver police officers as they patrolled the Downtown Eastside, and was shown in high schools nationwide. The trend of high school tours was likely instigated by the popularity of this film. I had believed that this trend of Downtown Eastside tours had passed, and that it would no longer be sanctioned within the community, but I recently found an episode of the reality TV show *The Beat* (July 29, 2012) produced by OLN (The Outdoor Life Network) in which four high school aged hockey players are toured around the neighbourhood by police officers.
Looking back, I can see the scale of exploitation that was at work in our visit to the Downtown Eastside. Ian and Jeffery, and several other people we met, were compelled into telling their stories, not because they wanted to, but because they were told to. The people we met were blatantly objectified, as police exhibited very little regard for their safety or for the messaging this trip imparted to us students. Essentially, we were being told that these people – the residents of the Downtown Eastside – were nothing more than the lesson they could teach us about abstinence. This flattened the residents of the community into one easily identifiable generalization: addicts. Ostensibly, the intentions of our tour were likely ‘positive’ – to foster awareness and facilitate drug education. However, the tour reinscribed the marginality of residents and perpetuated stigmatizing perceptions of the Downtown Eastside. Ian, however, opened up the possibilities for a different kind of engagement with this community’s members, one driven by individual control and common ground. Ian was, of course, still compelled into speaking to us, but his gracious and humbling offer to sit with him on the street and listen was a gesture that leveled complex layers of authority. Ian offered a model for connection and conversation wherein he controlled his story, its message, and the way it was told. Simultaneously, we listeners were offered the opportunity to engage and interact with him and his story. I have sat on many street corners in the Downtown Eastside since then, and I always think of Ian and the valuable lesson he taught me that day: if we can find common ground, we can talk. It is in our conversations and interactions that the potential for changing perceptions about the Downtown Eastside and its residents resides.

with “the goal,” according to the show’s narrator, “to educate these role models to become anti-drug ambassadors in their own communities.”
In this chapter I will discuss two recent books that advocate for the conjunction of
dialogism and storytelling to create a similar kind of communicative level ground. In *Hope in
Shadows: Stories and Photographs of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside* and *In Plain Sight:
Reflections on Life in Downtown Eastside Vancouver*, community members articulate their own
stories in their own words. These narratives are then compiled by editors for publication. Both
books engage community members via interviews, with the goals of 1) providing storytellers
with autonomy and agency by narrativizing their own experience, 2) creating more nuanced
representations of the neighbourhood, and 3) providing readers with a means by which to listen
and learn. I will discuss how the texts attempt to bring power and autonomy to marginal
individuals in the Downtown Eastside by creating spaces where community members can
represent themselves through narrative. I will consider the methodology of each project,
including the stated intentions of the editors, how participants were selected, and the processes
through which their narratives were editorialized. I will also look to the formal structural features
of each text, analyzing how editors have brought multiple voices and perspectives into dialogic
interaction. Ultimately, I will argue that *Hope in Shadows* and *In Plain Sight* articulate one
productive way of representing the community, as they challenge any facile definitions of this
place or its people through dialogic self-representation.

### 2.1 Context and Ethical Questions

The typical story about the Downtown Eastside goes something like this: it usually
begins with the word ‘notorious’ and includes a reference to ‘the poorest postal code’; it labels
people as ‘prostitutes,’ ‘addicts’ or ‘the poor;’ it uses words like ‘problem’ and ‘slum’ as
descriptors. The typical mythos about the community casts it as degenerate and squalid place,
dangerous and threatening in its depravity and vice. Many of these representations exotify the
Downtown Eastside into a kind of ‘tragedy porn,’ voyeuristically reveling in the spectacle of addiction and suffering in the area. I use the word typical, here, to signal the reductive quality of the cultural imagination about the Downtown Eastside, as community members are often reduced to mere typifications. I note the trend, rather than calling on particular examples, because this is a pervasive representational shorthand for the community that exist across genres, from literature to film, in news media, even in people’s personal blogs and YouTube videos. In the coming pages, I am interested in raising questions about what the politics of representation are for the community, and exploring what I see as productive avenues for destabilizing these ‘typical’ cultural narratives. *Hope in Shadows* and *In Plain Sight* seem to recognize, and be responses to, the ongoing flattening and typification of the community’s residents. Just as Ian asked us to sit on the street with him, these texts open up a space where community members can speak for themselves, and where others are given the opportunity to listen. The texts articulate a media/medium for building dialogical engagement across the often-limiting physical and ideological boundaries that demarcate the Downtown Eastside.

The narratives in *Hope in Shadows* and *In Plain Sight* are drawn from the lives of real, often oppressed, sometimes deeply marginalized individuals. The intent of this chapter is not to subject those individuals and their stories to continued criticism. Rather, it is to consider how the two projects strategically position themselves and the stories they contain as activism, to analyze the vocabulary and representational strategies the editors employ, and to ask questions about how the texts might be received by their readership. As such, I will analyze the presentation of each project primarily through its literary strategies, and have purposely not analyzed the content of participants’ stories themselves. I am cognizant that excerpting participant narratives has the potential to turn their nuanced, contextualized, and very particularly (and personally)
narrativized perspectives into mere sound-bites. Moreover, though, I am aware that privileging the points of view of editors, and/or other ‘experts,’ risks further marginalizing the participants’ voices that these texts are meant to celebrate. In her review of *In Plain Sight* Margot Lee Butler discusses the ethical complexities of critiquing collections of real-life stories such as these. She contends that the critic’s own work must be aware of the risk of “reducing, simplifying or fixing – stereotyping – people according to certain culturally highlighted, often disparaging characteristics or ways of being” (67). Butler quotes full passages of the text and engages in a nuanced discussion of how quoting from these self-representational acts ought not to clip sentences or remove words that have been carefully crafted by participants (69), as these practices “have ethical valence in terms of the politics of representation” (69). My work has been greatly informed by Butler, who points to the choices we make as critics to respectfully engage with the ethics of the text as presented. As such, where I have engaged with the voices of community members, I have followed Butler’s quotation principles, in order to give residents’ words the reverence they deserve.

2.2 Theoretical Model: Storytelling and the Four-Fold Dialogic Process

Before turning to the texts themselves, I should pause for a moment on the concept of storytelling. As mentioned in the introduction, I understand ‘storytelling’ in the broad sense of the term. In this chapter, though, I also intend it to gesture to storytelling as a practice. When you spend time in the Downtown Eastside, the community’s affinity for storytelling is especially evident. In a place where most residents are separated from their families and communities of origin, building bridges of companionship, trust, and reliance are imperative; for many, these connections are built over stories and shared communication. Moreover, many service organizations in the community employ storytelling as a way for disenfranchised residents to
effect self-actualization.\textsuperscript{16} The Downtown Eastside Studio Society and the Thursdays Writing Collective, for example, consider writing and storytelling to be important personal acts of healing. As Elee Kraljii Gardiner, one of the organizers of the Thursdays Writing Collective has stated: “When silencing is systemic – due to poverty-related issues or cultural practices of abuse and prejudice, or other reasons – asserting one’s expression is life-sustaining” (qtd in Zomparelli). Storytelling, in the Downtown Eastside, then, is not just about relating simple narratives, but is bound up in complex personal and cultural questions of identity, expression, and recognition.

I have called the strategies used in \textit{Hope in Shadows} and \textit{In Plain Sight} ‘dialogic self-representation.’ In both texts, I see dialogism working on four simultaneously operating registers. This simultaneity works to destabilize monologism and implicate both their participants and their readers in a series of intertwined dialogical processes that effect recognition and redefinition. First, in order to express and explore their own story, an important internal dialogic process is enacted for participants themselves, as they engage in self-making and self-definition through narrative.\textsuperscript{17} Further, each project enacts a dialogic exchange between the interviewer and the participant in the collection of Downtown Eastside stories, as they interact in both the interview and editorial processes. Each book then brings various Downtown Eastside voices and points of view into contact with one another within the bounds of the text

\textsuperscript{16}See Eakin or Gullestad for discussions of how personal identity is shaped through narrative. Similarly, in cases of trauma, personal storytelling is often advocated as a way of ordering events. Due to the elusive and diffuse nature of traumatic memory (Carruth, LaCapra) there are many psychoanalysts who advocate for the power of storytelling as a constitutive practice that aids a survivor in coping with and processing its continued presence (Kirmayer). As such, many recovery programs and service providers in the Downtown Eastside employ storytelling for healing.\textsuperscript{17} This concept is informed by both psychological and narrative theory. Psychologist Hubert Hermans argues that a Bakhtinian process of dialogical thinking occurs within an individual’s psyche aiding them in a process of self-identity and formation of boundaries, while other realms of psychological study have applied the idea of dialogism to the interactions between people, arguing that they are an integral part of crafting a shared experience (Shotter and Billig).
itself, building a dialogic network of information between the stories of community members as they inform and inflect one another. Publication allows these dialogical systems and voices to move out into the world at large, creating a relationship between inside and outside and effecting a dialogic interface between the text and its reader. This, by extension, links the real-world reader to the real-world speaker, and this is where the true potential for begetting redefinition of pervasive ideas about the Downtown Eastside resides. In articulating and recognizing multiple and diverse points of view, this framework challenges any static understanding of the community or its residents. Recall Michael Holquist’s definition of dialogism: discourse “undergoes ‘dialogization’ when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, [and/or] aware of competing definitions of the same things,” whereas “undialogized language is authoritative or absolute” (427). The four-fold dialogic structure activates intertwined processes of ‘dialogization’ and therefore, redefinition. This framework does not function as a linear progression across discreet steps, but rather, as a spherical interaction between systems of enmeshed dialogic discourse that works centrifugally (in Bakhtin’s terms) to destabilize any homogenaic definition of the Downtown Eastside. By creating a space for dialogism to operate, Hope in Shadows and In Plain Sight are part of ongoing real-world dialogic (and by extension activist) processes that have the potential to destabilize conventional representations of the community and re-formulate social perceptions of the Downtown Eastside and its members by way of these multivalent connections.

2.3 The Community’s Self-Representational Texts

In 2003 the Downtown Eastside’s Pivot Legal Society initiated the ‘Hope in Shadows Photography Contest’ as “a response to the disparaging images that are commonly taken of the DTES by the media and artists who often misrepresent the true picture of the community” (Hope in Shadows, 14, acronym used in the original). The project, which became a rousing community
success, saw Pivot distribute hundreds of disposable cameras to residents of the Downtown Eastside, asking them to represent their community from their own points of view. The winning images were published in a calendar that was sold across Vancouver, raising funds for Pivot while providing income for participating community members. The photography project was “an important source of empowerment for the people of the DTES” (Hope in Shadows, 14) that expanded from the yearly calendar to an annual exhibition, and further, to a text of resident stories compiled by poets Brad Cran and Gillian Jerome.

Hope In Shadows: Stories and Photographs of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, published in 2008, is an oral history project that combines personal resident narratives with photographs from the annual competition. According to the editorial preface, the intent of Hope in Shadows was to bring the photography contest’s self-representational principles into text (16). Hope In Shadows includes thirty-three resident narratives, based on participant interviews conducted by Cran and Jerome, as well as a foreword by the area’s MP Libby Davies, a historical and contextual discussion from Pivot Legal Society’s John Richardson, and an editorial preface from Cran and Jerome. Storytellers for the book were selected from prior photography contest participants who demonstrated interest in the project. The editors “worked with [participants] through the interview and editing process to prepare their stories for the printing press” (16). Thus, participants had some hand in crafting the printed narratives that are presented in the book. Participants reviewed their narratives before publication and decided upon the name

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18 At the time of writing, the Hope In Shadows photography competition is in its 11th year, and has developed into a paradigmatic community project. The project website (a wonderful example of dialogic representation in its own right) cites that, since its inception in 2003, the project has generated an archive of over 30,000 images captured by Downtown Eastside residents, and vendors have sold over 75,000 copies of the yearly Hope in Shadows calendar (“Our Story”). At a selling price of twenty dollars each, with ten of that going directly to the community vendor, this has been a very successful economic initiative for the community, as well as rallying point for support, engagement, and enthusiasm.
that they wanted their story published under. Cran and Jerome state that, editorially, they strove to keep themselves “out of the project as much as possible” wanting “to lend [their] skill and not [their] voices” (17), in order to help participants craft their own narratives. Participants use their narrative space to speak about their own experiences of the Hope in Shadows project, the details of their photos, and often, the associated stories of their lives. The participants offer a diverse cross-section of perspectives on the Downtown Eastside, as they come from all walks of life and from all over the world. Many participants discuss the reasons they came to the Downtown Eastside – poverty, mental illness, or addiction being chief among them. Others address the stigmatization they often experience due to living in this particular community; in response, they discuss their neighbourhood as a supportive and accepting place and register their will to change perceptions about the community. Notably, though, the participants’ opinions about the area do not necessarily align, nor do the types of narratives they present. Rather, each person expresses his or her own point of view, telling about the community, while telling about themselves. *Hope In Shadows* is particularly successful in how it brings all of these heterogeneous perspectives together in one place. In as much as the narrative voices are counterposed to one another, this form creates a dialogic relationship among them as readers move fairly quickly from one person’s voice – and their associated perceptions and opinions – to another and another and another. One gets the feeling that participants had some autonomy in deciding what to talk about, since there is no definitive overriding theme or structure to the narratives. They vary in length, type of content, and outlooks on the community. Note that I consider the paratextual narratives from Richardson, Davies, and Cran and Jerome to be ‘community member voices’ as well. Libby Davies’ political activism in the neighbourhood stretches back to the 1970s, as a founding member of DERA; Brad Cran and Gillian Jerome live in East Vancouver and engaged with the
community through these interviews; as the founder of Pivot John Richardson works in the community advocating for social justice. By including the personal perspectives of each of these perceived ‘experts’ – governmental, artistic, judicial – Hope in Shadows builds a broader definition of what it means to be a member of the Downtown Eastside community. However, while these three paratexts precede the participant narratives, they do not seem to establish authority over them. Rather, they all exist in conjunction; no one overriding narrative takes precedence, as multiple people who are invested in this community discuss their distinct experience of it.

The one exception to this is John Richardson’s fourteen page overview of the issues that affect the Downtown Eastside. While Richardson does discuss his own relationship to the community through the story of Pivot’s inception, his narrative functions more as a contextual discussion that comes to dialogically engage with and inflect the stories of residents which it precedes. Richardson discusses the five core areas of concern that Pivot works to address: policing, housing, addiction, sex work, and child protection. These concerns are raised over and over again in the 33 resident narratives that follow, bringing Richardson’s contextual paratext into direct dialogue with the stories, as they inform and inflect each other. After reading the participant narratives, the five core issues that Richardson identifies are no longer merely legal or judicial matters. They are community concerns that have real implications for the health and wellbeing of Downtown Eastside residents; this is made more tangible and more apparent through the multiple perspectives and stories of participants.

Richardson’s narrative also provides the contextualization that helps position this text as activism. He explains that Pivot’s goal is to engage in “a strategic approach to social change,” due to the “overwhelming need for a legal response to the pressing human rights issues” (18) in
the neighbourhood. Since Pivot’s inception in 2000, each branch of the society has published legal and activist social welfare reports, all of which employ stories from the neighbourhood as a way to witness resident experiences and make them accessible to the wider public in order to effect legal change. Regarding sex work in the community, Pivot published *Voices for Dignity* in 2004, which contained the sworn statements of ninety-four area sex-workers who called for Canada’s prostitution laws to be repealed.\(^{19}\) Similar reports, all utilizing stories, were published over the past decade in relation to housing, policing, and child protection.\(^{20}\) It seems, at its core, that Pivot’s ‘strategic approach’ to advocacy for the Downtown Eastside is about stories in multiplicity. Their work employs dialogic frameworks for representing the community, as participants engage with an imagined reader (and vice versa), with the stated intent of facilitating connections and challenging common perceptions about the community.

In the final section of Richardson’s introduction, he turns his gaze onto readers themselves, placing the onus for activism in their dialogic process. In “The Book You Are Reading” (31), Richardson calls his imagined audience to attention, appealing to their emotions. According to Richardson, the success of the Hope in Shadows concept lies in compassion, and “the stories and photographs in this book are a step towards engendering that compassion” (31) from readers. He further states that while “people are often wary of approaching the DTES and its citizens, both physically and emotionally” this book “create[s] a safe vantage point for people

\(^{19}\) The Supreme Court recently struck down Canada’s core prostitution laws including soliciting sex, operating a brothel, and living off the avails of prostitution. While the sale of sex has never been illegal in Canada, these other related offences drove sex-work underground, marginalizing and endangering sex-workers. In Canada vs. Bedford (December 20, 2013), the Supreme Court ruled that the current laws violate the constitutional rights of sex-workers and gave the government one year to develop new laws. See articles by Crawford or Bennett. Pivot Legal Society supported the Bedford case, in part with the help of this document.

to care about and understand” (31) the community, without being wrapped up in their own fears of the space. He states: “by reading this book and hearing the poignant voices of residents, you are helping to break down those fears and dispel the misguided notions of what this community really is” (31). While Richardson calls attention to the dialogic process that I see as being productive for the community, his assertions about the effects of these processes are overly deterministic and greatly oversimplified. For example, what exactly constitutes safety as regards the Downtown Eastside? And is the safety of readers really what is at stake here? If these stories are operating to effect social justice, we ought to be more attuned to the safety of community members, rather than reinscribing the often-unfounded fears of outsiders. While Richardson’s call to readers is well meaning, as he highlights the book’s attempt to break down the ‘misguided notions’ of the community, his assertion that the text will generate compassion and understanding seems too simple. They could elicit such affective responses, but, as discussed in my introduction, we cannot ever presume to know what a particular reader’s response will be. There does not seem to be any recognition, in Richardson’s statement, that the text could actually reinscribe division rather than disperse it. Perhaps the key to Richardson’s message is in the active response he expects from readers: “by reading… you are helping” he says. Here, he calls attention to the active process of redefinition that will be required to “break down” the stereotypes about the community. While this is at the core of dialogical thinking, we must remain aware of the fact that the deeply entrenched systems that have served to marginalize community members will not be solved merely by reading this book.

Other questions remain about *Hope in Shadows*. I wonder how the interviews with participants were conducted. Was there a set of questions that participants were asked? Did these incline their narratives to certain forms of discussion? While I am calling these stories ‘self-
representational,’ in as much as participants speak about themselves, the scale of the autonomy participants had over their own stories is unclear. Cran and Jerome state that they “worked with” (16) participants in the editorial process, but how did that actually manifest? In some places the narratives seem conspicuously bereft of references to local vocabulary and service organizations, which might imply that they have been highly mediated. Or, it might not. Without any specific comment from the editors about the process of moving from taped interviews to text it is difficult to know just what was edited and how. Moreover, the preface states that they interviewed fifty-seven people in the community for this project, which they “narrowed down to the thirty-three you now see in this book” (17). How did they decide who got ‘narrowed down’? While I believe Hope in Shadows is a highly productive representation, a more thorough discussion of editorial practices would have benefitted the project. As it stands, the book could be read in various competing ways. Consider that it is a fundraiser for the Pivot Legal Society: one could argue that editorial choices were made to make participants’ stories more relatable, or that certain narratives were chosen over others in order to sell books. If that were the case, would it make this text a commodification of Downtown Eastside stories, rather than an activist literary expression? While I do not believe this is the case, without knowing more about the particular representational practices employed in the book, it is difficult to say.

Ultimately, Cran and Jerome state that the project is “about making connections with people” (17). We could construe this as their interactions with residents in the interview process, the interactions engendered between narratives in the book, or the connection between the teller and the reader, or all of these, simultaneously combined. The dialogic potential of Hope in Shadows lies in these connections between the compelling (and often competing) voices included within it. The book explicitly draws attention to multiple voices that all have something they
deem important to say. Many of the participant’s narratives draw attention to the need for change, reforms, and activism, and the book, by virtue of its intention as a fundraiser for Pivot Legal Society is literally helping to mobilize that activism. The collection is light on the ethical implications of its publication and makes assumptions about the very optimistic way that readers will interact with it, but still, it provides a tangible space for a large number of Downtown Eastside residents to represent themselves.

Leslie Robertson and Dara Culhane’s *In Plain Sight: Reflections on Life in Downtown Eastside Vancouver*, published in 2005, presents a much more self-reflexive outlook on representations of the community. *In Plain Sight* is an ethnographic study, a social history, and a series of autobiographies of local women, that stemmed from a wider research project about the barriers to health and housing for women in the Downtown Eastside. The book offers a unique entry point into the community as seven female residents of the area detail their own experiences of this space, drawing attention to the events, issues and concerns that are specifically important to them. *In Plain Sight*’s parent project, “The Health and Home Research Project” based at Simon Fraser University, ran from 1999 – 2005, and looked at the relationship between housing and health in the lives of women from the community, focusing on the structural barriers and systemic obstacles that the women might encounter in attaining good health and adequate shelter. Researchers interviewed participants several times over the course of this longitudinal study, which led to the idea of having the women publish their stories. The stated intention of the text is to “open a space for the voices of women who are seldom heard on their own terms” (9) to tell their stories, in their own words. *In Plain Sight* was born from the question “what might be learned if members of such excluded groups tell their own stories in their own words, are
listened to, and taken seriously” (172)? 21 This was a simple, but radical and activist, question when applied to women who have been silenced for so long. 

It is evident throughout In Plain Sight that Robertson and Culhane have taken great pains to establish a contextual understanding of the Downtown Eastside for readers so that the women’s ‘own words’ will not simply be swept away in a tide of stigmatized judgment. Robertson and Culhane open the text with a brief social history of the neighbourhood and its challenges, a detailed introductory discussion of the logic, process, and intentions of their project, as well as internal glosses and explanations, references for further reading, and a glossary of local terms – all highly dialogized rhetorical strategies that compel the reader to interact with the text and engage with its concerns. Their introduction is divided into two broad sections, ‘The Stories’ and ‘The Place,’ recognizing from the outset that the two are indelibly linked and that there is a deep inter-relational effect between them. ‘The Stories’ section details the process of collection and editing of the narratives, highlighting the collaborative nature of the project and addressing concerns about potential appropriation and objectification. ‘The Place’ provides a historical and contemporary context for the issues endemic to the community. 

Robertson and Culhane’s structure implies that making readers aware of systems of power, politics and oppression that have (and continue to) operate in the neighbourhood is key, especially in as much as these concerns interact with and inflect the women’s stories. 

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21 It is important to note that not all the women who were involved in “The Health and Home Research Project” participated in In Plain Sight. Only the women who expressed a personal interest in telling their life stories were approached, so as not to force already marginalized women into narrative self-exposure. That said, many more women were initially involved in the project. As the process of collecting and editing stories developed, several women dropped out, others became ill, and others died (Robertson and Culhane 175). I note this fact, as it is important to keep in mind that the barriers Downtown Eastside community members face in telling their stories are not merely ideological or conceptual. Not ‘having a voice,’ in this sense, can be due to very real physical impediments, of which death is the ultimate form. This makes the telling of these women’s stories all the more crucial.
In Plain Sight’s table of contents similarly points to the need for context, as well as to the collaborative nature of the accounts that will follow. Each chapter is devoted to a woman and delineated by her name (‘Chapter 1: Pawz’; ‘Chapter 2: Laurie’ etc.), thus prioritizing each individual woman from the outset. Each chapter is then further broken down into three sections: an ‘editor’s introduction’, the woman’s narrative, identified by a title of her choice, and a ‘narrator’s afterword’ in which the narrator answers questions from the interviewer/editor. This three-fold approach creates even more dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee, but also acknowledges the existence of an outside audience, as each individual’s ‘afterword,’ in particular, is directly geared at the reader. In each afterword interviewers asked questions like: “Why do you want to make your story public?” (60), “who do you want to read this?” (61), and “what do you think is the value of telling these stories?” (101). Here, the participants have a forum to (re)speak about their narrative, and to speak directly to the reader who holds this text in their hands, drawing as direct a conversational link as possible through the textual form. In Sara’s afterword, from June of 2003, she is asked: “Why do you want to publish your story?” Sara’s response: “For once, I get to say my piece. I’ve done a whole lot of interviews on this and that around my life, around things from downtown like the missing women. A lot of stuff that I said was taken out of context or wasn’t portrayed properly, and in the end it looked like non-truths. So this is finally my chance to say something and for it to be accurate” (125). After the seven chapters of women’s stories, there is an editor’s afterword that wraps up the repeated themes of the project, as well as several appendices aimed at enhancing the informative experience of the reader, namely a section of suggestions for further reading and a glossary of terms and services. In a highly symbolic equalizing gesture, the dedications page at the outset of the text is devoted to dedications from the seven women themselves, while Culhane and
Robertson’s acknowledgements for the project come at the very end of the text after all of the women have spoken.

What becomes clear as you read the narratives from these seven women is the scale of collaboration that this project enacted and how transparent Robertson and Culhane have tried to be about their own interventions. The introduction to In Plain Sight explains that this became a highly collaborative process between editors and participants, as “each account… [was] woven together from several tape recorded interviews and conversations,” and that they thus became “social documents that record dialogues between narrators and listeners” (8). The seven women who participated had full editorial control over the content and structure of their narratives, but were assisted by the editors in a creative process of crafting a narrative from their own interviews, allowing for a self-reflexive fashioning of identity through narrative. The editors strove to honour the women’s stories, “to present what they had to say in their own language, using the metaphors, explanations, and descriptions of events that they chose to speak about” (8–9). Thus, the inflections of individual voices remain here, as do slang terms, and hesitations, marked by changes in punctuation. Robertson and Culhane sought to keep their editorial eye out of the women’s narratives and not impose an overriding style upon them; as such, they warn readers that the “stories do not always flow smoothly,” rather, they are “verbal accounts… characterized by repetition, stutters and hesitations that when read differ quite dramatically from more literary expressions” (9). Robertson and Culhane seem wary of any perception that this text is engaging in a literary manipulation of fact; they felt the need to explicitly state that they have not applied “a literary veneer to [the] oral accounts” (9) suggesting that they are aware of potential concerns about manipulation or appropriation. Yet, it is quite clear as you read In Plain Sight that these women’s voices are articulating whatever it is that they want to articulate, not
what has been prescribed or expected, nor a sanitized version of their lives. The narratives are beautiful and evocative of lives lived on the margins, and while the narratives are sometimes choppy, this is part of the value of their highly dialogic form. Within the dialogic, thoughts, anecdotes and opinions need not be fully formed or articulated in a completely clear way. Rather, what is important – and what *In Plain Sight* engages in – is the process of expression and the attempt to capture that process in text.

While the editors seem hesitant to define these narratives as ‘literary’ in as much as that might mean ‘fictional,’ analyzing the book in light of a dialogic literary strategy is highly instructive. The seven women who have participated in *In Plain Sight* confront readers with a series of difficult to navigate topics, that often do not follow a linear progression, and which, in their sometimes spastic dialogism, come as close as I have seen to capturing the complexity of life in the Downtown Eastside. The women speak of social service agencies (or drugs, or places) with which a reader might not be familiar, or of which he/she may have a completely different knowledge than the narrator. As such, the reader is then compelled to consider their definition, understanding, and position in relation to the woman’s story. If one is unfamiliar with the lexicon of the neighbourhood, one might begin flipping back and forth between narrative and glossary, or between a narrative and its editor’s introduction, engaging with and forming a dialogic web of information between the narratives and their paratexts that recognizes several competing and often challenging definitions of the same ideas.

In its multiplicity, its collaborative nature, and its compelling intertextuality, *In Plain Sight* provides an exceptional example of dialogic interaction between members of the Downtown Eastside community and the academic community outside, and further, to the reading public at large. The highly dialogized form of the text points to the value of this particular
representational strategy in capturing the complexity of the Downtown Eastside community, but also, on a wider scale, gestures to the necessity for dialogue between people as a way of engendering understanding. The form of *In Plain Sight*, with its editorial interventions, historical discussions and glossary, suggests that outsiders to the Downtown Eastside community require some kind of mediated relationship to the neighbourhood’s stories. Often, they get this from typifying representations wherein the mediation inclines the information to a monologic judgment of the Downtown Eastside and its residents. *In Plain Sight*, in contrast, offers a strategic framework for crafting mediation as dialogue, through both its form and the anticipated reader experience. One could argue, however, that Robertson and Culhane’s editorial interventions are in fact monologic gestures, since the resident narratives are literally bounded by the words of the editors, both in the text as a whole and in each chapter. It is also important to recognize that this project is an ethnographic one, initiated and edited by two anthropologists. One could argue that this academic frame inclines the book to a particular type of representation, and it probably does. This should not, however, detract from the important dialogic processes that the text can activate for a reader. Due to the collaborative, synergistic nature of the project, and Robertson and Culhane’s editorial transparency, I read these gestures as guiding principles that help a reader navigate this particularly complex dialogic landscape. The editorial interventions do not speak over the women in an attempt to make their stories cohesive; rather, they echo the concerns of the narrators and inflect them with other nuances or information, allowing them to reverberate more loudly.  

22 For their part, the editors are keenly aware of the

22 There is, however, a set of common themes that emerge from the narratives, as women repeatedly discuss similar concerns. To me, this is indicative more of the proximity of the women and their particular social locations rather than any kind of monologic imposition on the part of editors. The women who narrate *In Plain Sight*’s stories were all involved in the Health and Home research project, which inclines them to a particular sub-section of the
irony of producing a book of stories about the Downtown Eastside while critiquing other representations of the space. In their afterword, they ask: “Is publishing this book yet another act of voyeurism, no different, really, from the media sensationalizing we criticize?” (170). The very fact that they self-consciously pose this question but cannot offer a definitive answer, and that they, by extension, ask readers to think about this question, inclines *In Plain Sight* towards the dialogic.

Robertson and Culhane conclude their afterword by asking: “how do we responsibly present and understand narratives about lives not typically valorized by history, biography, or community memoir?” (171). This abiding question continues to resonate in my mind. Both *Hope in Shadows* and *In Plain Sight* articulate a will to respectfully engage with the Downtown Eastside through dialogue and to model that dialogue for readers through the methodology of each text’s design. In both books, no single point of view claims absolute authority – certainly not the editors, and certainly not any one narrative. Undeniably, though, there are unifying themes that run throughout both books, especially as regards their anticipated reader response of compassion and understanding. In as much as the texts attempt to articulate counter-narratives to deeply entrenched systems of marginalization, though, I read these more as pedagogical gestures rather than as monologic ones. The editors are, perhaps, trying to guide readers through a new, if imperfect, form of representation of the community. While *In Plain Sight* is more explicit about the rhetorical strategies it employs for actualizing dialogism, it may also be critiqued for the unity of the voices it presents. While *Hope in Shadows* may be critiqued for its lack of methodological rigor, it can also be commended for providing a representational platform for so

Downtown Eastside community. While this is not explicitly stated in the text, one gets the sense that these women have housing, and that many are engaged in some kind of addiction recovery process (at least at the time of their telling), which no doubt influences what kinds of stories this particular book tells.
many Downtown Eastside residents. While *In Plain Sight* provides an example of in-depth scholarly dialogism, *Hope in Shadows* presents a version that is considerably more accessible. Taken together, *Hope in Shadows* and *In Plain Sight* sketch out the broad tenets of a framework for productive and respectful representations of the Downtown Eastside community, with dialogic self-representation as its primary mode of expression.

The dialogic function of both *Hope in Shadows* and *In Plain Sight* has continued to expand since their publication. The B.C. Teacher’s Federation recommends both texts for high school teachers who want to discuss relevant and local social justice concerns with their students. *Hope in Shadows* won the 2008 Vancouver Book Award, sold 5000 copies through its community vendor program (“Our Story”), and is still available in most local bookstores. *In Plain Sight* was also nominated for the Vancouver Book Award (in 2005), and is now in its third printing. Looking at the distribution of the texts gives some indication as to their potential for dialogic efficacy: *Hope in Shadows*, for example, is in circulation at one hundred libraries worldwide according to its WorldCat listing, while *In Plain Sight* is in circulation at 119 different sites internationally. Generally, Downtown Eastside residents are not recognized or valorized enough to be included in the cultural or archival records. These books of their narratives, then, serve important ideological functions as they allow the voices of this subjugated community to persist as part of the public archive.
Chapter 3 - Dialogic (Non)Fiction: *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*

In the last chapter I argued that *Hope in Shadows* and *In Plain Sight* both activate dialogic processes of cross-community engagement that challenge common assumptions about the Downtown Eastside through self-representation and dialogue. In this chapter, I will consider how Marie Clements’ play *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* employs a similar network of dialogic engagement to redress the silence surrounding women who have gone missing from or been murdered in the Downtown Eastside. Clements’ play fictionalizes the real-life story of a series of murders that occurred between 1965 and 1987. Straddling the line between fiction and non-fiction, the play presents an amalgam of created and real-world voices that speak to, about, and from the Downtown Eastside, engaging with instances of historical violence as well as the current concerns of the community. The play exposes a deeply rooted system of oppression and prejudice that turns a deaf ear to repeated patterns of violence against marginalized women from the community. While *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* is at once a dialogic response to historical events and a challenging of the status quo that allows women to continue to disappear from the Downtown Eastside, it also advocates for the ability of community and cooperation to effect change.

In this chapter, I will first consider the contemporary and historical instances of violence against women in the Downtown Eastside with which the play engages. As my analysis is concerned with the current social role of the text, this chapter will begin with a discussion of a pivotal and complex portion of the community’s history, the now ubiquitous investigation into the Downtown Eastside’s ‘murdered and missing women.’ I will then move backwards, discussing the historical precedents of violence against women that inspired the play and which
Clements employs in the story’s structure. In the second half of the chapter, I will consider the representational tactics of the play itself. My analysis will pay particular attention to the formal features of the text that activate dialogism, including multiplicity, intertextuality, and double voicing. I argue that *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* is a pointed critique of a monologic culture of oppression and ignorance. The play speaks to the potential of dialogue, connection, and community as alternatives to the repeated social and institutional silencing that has lead to the marginalization and deaths of so many women.

### 3.1 The Context: Murdered and Missing Women

Before turning to the play itself, it is important to first step back and consider the cultural events that both preceded and accompanied *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*’s production, Vancouver’s long history of ‘murdered and missing women.’ This term has become ubiquitous in Vancouver’s cultural imagination, much of this driven by the media spectacle that surrounded Robert Pickton’s arrest and trial in the 2002 to 2007 period. Published in 2005, this was the community reality with which *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* engaged. The play, however, was written several years before, in 1997, and premiered in 2000 at the Firehall Arts Centre in the Downtown Eastside. At the time of its writing and production, the play engaged with a different, but related community reality. In the late 1990s women were disappearing from the community at an average rate of about seven women per year, and were being added to an ever-expanding list of those who had gone missing since the late 1970s. The police, however, for

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24 Michelle LaFlamme’s article “Theatrical Medicine: Aboriginal Performance, Ritual and Commemoration” suggests that the play was written and had its first staged reading at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre in 1997 (112).
the most part, could not be convinced of the significance of these women or their disappearances. They dedicated very few resources to investigations and repeatedly dismissed the concerns of community service organizations, family members, and friends. In 1999 the Vancouver Police Department finally bowed to pressure from the Downtown Eastside community and issued the first missing women’s poster. This poster included the images of thirty-one women who had gone “missing from the streets of Vancouver” since 1978. Splashed across the top of the poster, in black and yellow lettering reminiscent of caution tape, were the words “Missing Downtown Eastside Women.” Above that, in even bolder red lettering was the declaration of a one hundred thousand dollar reward for information that would lead to an arrest. The images of the women were visually subordinated by the flashy headline of the poster. Each of their photos was accompanied, first, by a file number directly to the image’s right, then the woman’s name, her year of birth, and the dates she was last seen and reported missing. Many critics have commented on the reductive qualities of the poster’s visual messaging; it reduces these women to their mug shots and the details of their disappearance, providing no space for the viewer to conceptualize them as individuals with families, friends, stories, and lives. For most people outside the Downtown Eastside community, this poster (and the others that followed it) would be their introduction to ‘Downtown Eastside Women.’ It was an introduction that no doubt did not foster or facilitate connection, but, instead, reified the women’s criminality, marginality and ‘otherness.’

25 See Wally Oppal’s *Forsaken* Volume II, Part 3, “Critical Police Failures.” Oppal identifies several barriers to reporting that family members and friends faced, including inconsistent reporting practices and rules, repeated delays and a lack of urgency in follow-up investigations and reporting.

26 For more detailed readings of this poster and subsequent ones issued by the VPD and RCMP Joint Task Force, see Amber Dean’s “Representation, Humanization, Recognition: Frameworks for Grieveable Lives” (132 – 173) or David Hugill’s *Missing Women, Missing News*. Dean discusses, for example, the use of the words ‘the streets of the
As discussed in my introduction, marginal people in the Downtown Eastside face a systemic network of silence. Their voices and needs are muted by social systems that stigmatize and ostracize them. The voices of the murdered and missing women, in particular, were quite literally taken away by their violent deaths or disappearances; further, their loved ones were subsequently silenced as they tried to advocate for justice. Similarly, most of the women who have been victimized in the Downtown Eastside have been excluded from the cultural record. Details of their killer’s lives exist in our cultural imaginations and archives while their names, stories and voices are generally lost. In recent years, sensational media coverage has solidified Robert Pickton as the perpetrator of violence in the Downtown Eastside and simultaneously effaced his victims. That coverage has promulgated the belief that disappearances of women from the community were all part of this single isolated incident of a serial killer. Deaths of vulnerable women from the Downtown Eastside, however, have been occurring for years, and the violence continues to this day. To set the stage for the concerns that were pertinent in the 2000 to 2010 period, it is perhaps best to reiterate the known facts of the case: police estimate that 69 women have gone missing from the Downtown Eastside community since 1978. Many of the women were engaged in survival sex work, many had addictions, and many were of Aboriginal descent. Robert Pickton was arrested in 2002 and eventually charged with 27 counts of first-degree murder of women from the community. In 2007 Pickton was convicted of six counts of second-degree murder, and the remainder of the charges against him were stayed, though he can be directly linked to each woman’s death through DNA evidence. The raft of "Downtown Eastside” to describe the women’s location, language that positioned them as marginal from the outset. Similarly, consider that by including a date last seen and a date reported missing that diverge, the poster implicitly suggests that no one was concerned enough to officially register the woman’s disappearance, which was, as I will discuss in more detail, clearly not the case.
attention directed toward the Pickton case belies the fact that even after all of the police investigations at least 39 women were still missing. Moreover, his arrest creates a false popular narrative that the perpetrator of violence against women in the Downtown Eastside has been stopped. Since his arrest, though, women have continued to disappear from and/or die violent deaths in the Downtown Eastside (Culbert). Tracing the details and facts about women who have been victimized by violence in the community, though, is extremely difficult. The same entrenched systems of oppression that drive their silence and marginalization help to efface concrete information about them. While definitions are contested, by some counts almost three hundred women have died violent or premature deaths in the Downtown Eastside over the past 40 years. This is both a staggering and sobering number.27

From my current vantage point in 2014, there is almost an overabundance of information to wade through about the current and historical status of women in the Downtown Eastside. We now have thousands of pages of institutional reports that time and again highlight the ineffective, 

27 There is no central database that tracks the details of murdered and missing women from the community, though there have been attempts by various researchers and organizations to do so. In 2009 and 2010 The Native Women’s Association of Canada’s (NWAC) Sisters in Spirit initiative built a database of cases of murdered and missing Aboriginal women in Canada, identifying 582 cases nationally as of March 31, 2010, including murders, disappearances, and suspicious deaths. Of this total, NWAC’s research identified 163 cases in British Columbia, 80% of those in urban areas, concentrated in Vancouver. According to NWAC, 49% of British Columbia’s cases of murdered and missing women remain unsolved (2012, 3). Again, though, none of the research can clearly identify how many women’s lives have been taken by violence in the Downtown Eastside, as statistics about marginalized peoples from this community are severely lacking. According to Amber Dean in 2006, “if we include the ‘closed cases’ of previously accounted for deaths (the deaths of women whose murders were solved or who died of drug overdoses) then there are at least 296 women from this community who have either been disappeared or died unjust, untimely deaths in the last thirty or so years” (10). To demonstrate the grassroots level of this information’s promulgation, though, it is important to note that Dean is taking this tally from the 2006 program of the Annual Downtown Eastside Women’s Memorial March, that listed the names of 224 women and adding those that the VPD/RCMP Joint Task force has identified. This number, though, is now outdated and may or may not include women who died ‘unjust, untimely deaths’ in other parts of Vancouver, not just the Downtown Eastside. Maryanne Pearce’s recent doctoral dissertation An Awkward Silence: Missing and Murdered Vulnerable Women and the Canadian Justice System is perhaps the most up to date and exhaustive source for information, though, again, her research does not isolate the Downtown Eastside. According to Pearce’s extensive database, 824 Aboriginal women have gone missing or been murdered nationally since the 1950s with the majority occurring between 1990 and 2013 (Kielburger).
biased, and objectifying practices of the police, the media, and the public in relation to
Vancouver’s missing women. We have Amnesty International’s 2004 report about
discrimination and violence against Aboriginal women in Canada, Stolen Sisters. We have the
Native Women’s Association of Canada’s Sisters in Spirit research reports, (2009, 2010, 2012),
which document the number and distribution of missing and murdered Aboriginal women
nationally. We have Wally Oppal’s report for the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry,
Forsaken, which was issued in 2012 after years of public consultation.28 We have an associated
report from the BC Civil Liberties Association and Pivot Legal Society, Blueprint for an Inquiry,
that condemns that same Commission for its continuing exclusion of marginal voices.29 We have
thousands of media reports from both international and national sources, and a media analysis of
that coverage (Hugill). We have academic studies that discuss the social and institutional
precursors to the women’s marginalization or that deconstruct the myriad representations of the
women that have appeared since Pickton’s arrest (Pearce, Dean). In the early 2000s though,
when Clements was workshopping her play, none of this attention existed. As David Hugill puts
it, “as the bulk of these crimes unfolded, local authorities and journalists were missing in action;
they made little acknowledgement of the crisis that was taking place. At best, they had failed to

28 It should be noted that the commission of inquiry came under fire from its inception. Many Downtown Eastside
community organizations and family members of the missing women criticized the commission for not being
inclusive enough of their voices and concerns (Griffin). While the commission and its associated reports can
certainly be critiqued, they are valuable for the scale of the information they present and the institutional recognition
(if limited) that the social, political and justice systems failed. Wally Oppal states that “the women were forsaken:
first, by society in general in failing to provide them with the basic conditions of safety and security to which every
human being is entitled; second, by the police who were entrusted with the responsibility of protecting all members
of society, particularly the vulnerable” (108).
29 According to Bennett et al, “the Commission repeated the very mistakes that led to serial murderer Robert Pickton
being able to operate with impunity in the first place – the voices of marginalized women were shoved aside while
the ‘professional’ opinions of police and government officials took centre stage” (5). The report further highlights
the importance of ‘consultation and collaboration’ when dealing with marginal communities – or, in my terms, the
report highlights the necessity of dialogue. It is their recommendation that, in the future, “inquiries that are called in
response to the concerns of marginalized communities, must consult thoroughly at every stage with those
communities and the organizations that work with those communities” (5).
notice. At worst, they had failed to care” (10). According to Oppal, the lack of attention to the women’s disappearances was the “manifestation of …broader patterns of systemic discrimination within Canadian society and was reinforced by the political and public indifference to the plight of marginalized female victims” (94).

In the Downtown Eastside itself, however, community members were acutely aware of both the disappearances and the public and institutional indifference towards them. Family members and friends contacted police to mobilize investigations only to be told that their loved one had probably just wandered off, that she would turn up, that they shouldn’t worry. Long before the justice and social systems noticed, long before the sensational public interest in Robert Pickton, members of the Downtown Eastside community had been intimately aware of the gendered and racialized violence directed towards certain community members, and had been registering their concern for years.30 At the time, this systemic neglect was something community members knew only through their experiences, not because of inquiries. It was something that was addressed not through institutional reports and statistics but through grassroots activism. In the early 2000s, local organizations like the Missing Women’s Memorial March (begun in 1991), the Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre, and the WISH Drop-in Centre mobilized various activist endeavors, all the while calling for attention and justice for victimized members of their community.

The writing and production of The Unnatural and Accidental Women can be understood as part of these diffuse activist processes, as it brought attention to the current and historical

30 For example, consider that the first February 14th Memorial Women’s March was held in the community in 1991. For more information about the history of the Downtown Eastside Women’s Memorial March, held annually on Valentines day, see the documentary, Survival, Strength, Sisterhood: Power of Women in the Downtown Eastside (2011).
perpetration of violence against women from the community, as well as a pattern of systemic neglect for their safety. The play was first performed in 2000 at the Firehall Arts Centre on East Cordova in the Downtown Eastside, locating itself at the epicenter of the situation. The play explicitly engaged with the community in a series of talkback events between audiences, community members, actors and directors at the theatre (Harrison), community workshops (Couture), and a media campaign that highlighted the play’s activist message (Harrison). While, on one hand, the play directly engages with the current community concerns, on the other hand *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* resists wading into the uncertainty around the current disappearances of women. Instead, Clements’ play presents an analogous story that proves the point of ongoing systemic neglect.

### 3.2 The History: Repeated Patterns of Silence and Neglect

The women who inspired the play lived marginal lives in the lower echelons of Vancouver society, part of the ‘skid row’ community of East Hastings Street, as Clements notes in the play’s introductory material. They were, for the most part, poor, alcoholic or addicted women of Aboriginal decent whose deaths went unquestioned and uninvestigated for many years. For most people, the story of these women has been effaced and forgotten. Clements’ play, however, creates the conditions for a reclamation of their history, and boldly brings these women back into the cultural consciousness. The women who inspired *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* are:

- Ivy Rose (Doreen) Oswald, 1913 – 1965
- Mary Laurentia Johnson, 1938 – 1980
- Mary Doris Johns, 1957 – 1982
Patricia Thomas, 1944 – 1984
Patricia Josephine Andrew, 1940 – 1985
Velma Dora Gibbons, 1948 – 1986
Veronica Norma Harry, 1953 – 1986
Vanessa Lee Buckner, 1960 – 1987
Edna Marie Shade, 1934 – 1987

If someone had paid attention to these women and their deaths, if someone had listened to the outcry from their families and friends, if someone had recognized the pattern, their victimizer may have been brought to justice sooner. As I will be engaging with the ways in which Clements fictionalized the real-life details of these women’s lives, it is important to name them here, in the body of this chapter, in a gesture of respect, recognition, and memorial. I do so, however, while grappling with the potentially problematic ethics of such a gesture. I am cognizant that these women have families and friends who miss them and that my invocation of their names in an academic paper may be considered disrespectful. I do not intend to appropriate the grief or suffering of their family and friends. I do, however, believe it is crucial to recognize that the literature I discuss here takes its inspiration from real women and to acknowledge the loss of their lives. To analyze a play based on these ten women and never to have named them (or, to have named their assailant, and not the women themselves) would be a further injustice to the women and their memory. I take my cues from Amber Dean, who, in her dissertation *Hauntings: Representations of Vancouver’s Disappeared Women*, discusses how inadequate a gesture a list of names is in the incommensurability of lives lost. Naming, however, is important in as much as it signals the presence of individuals. The ten women whose names are listed above deserve to be remembered as people, not merely as ‘the victim of…’; their memory deserves to continue to
take up physical, ideological and symbolic space. As Dean discusses, however, a list of names is also a flawed memorial strategy in as much as it provides very little information about each woman as she was in life. Names are simply marks on a page and cannot ever hope to stand in for individuals, nor should they claim to. With this complex set of concerns in mind, Dean states: “Listing the names of the dead is a far from perfect memorial strategy but at the same time its importance persists,” thus, she offers names, as I do, “with the awareness that it is far too small and too simple a gesture” (7).

Gilbert Paul Jordan, the man responsible for the deaths of these women, could easily be tied to all ten of the murders. Three of the women died in Jordan’s barbershop, and he was present at and reported the deaths of another two. He could also be related to all five other cases, as he was either seen drinking with the woman just prior to her death, or was in possession of her belongings. As the women all died of alcohol poisoning, foul play was not initially suspected, and coroners ruled their deaths ‘unnatural and accidental.’ While several women’s family members insisted their deaths were not accidental, the Vancouver Police Department did not officially draw any connections between the cases until the 1987 death of Vanessa Lee Buckner. Buckner, who was only an occasional drinker, died in a room at the Niagara hotel, with a blood

31 I hesitate to give too much attention to Gilbert Paul Jordan and his criminal exploits, preferring instead to focus on the women and Clements’ representations of their stories. I think it is germane, however, to mention that Jordan had a lengthy association with British Columbia’s justice system. According to the 1988 Vancouver Sun special report by Rose, Pemberton, and Sarti, Jordan was implicated in more than 43 police incidents (up to 1988 – there were many more thereafter), including DUI’s, gross indecency, kidnapping (twice), and rape (A10). In 1976 prosecutors tried to have him declared a dangerous sex offender, but the case was stayed for lack of evidence (A11). Most of Jordan’s victims from the Downtown Eastside died thereafter. Jordan’s long history of alcohol-fueled violent and sexualized crimes seems to have been mostly stayed by the court system – his record is a long list of appeals, reductions, and dismissals. Jordan was an older white male, with enough money to hire formidable lawyers to defend him; by his own admission, that was the only reason he was not relegated to a jail cell (Beatty A4). For lengthy descriptions of Jordan’s life and crimes see articles by Rose, Pemberton, and Sarti, Beatty, and Hawthorn.

32 It is important to note that while the accused, Gilbert Paul Jordan, has been clearly linked to the deaths of these ten women, he was only convicted of manslaughter in one case. While most of the media surrounding Gilbert Paul Jordan cites him as having ‘murdered’ these women, as does the critical literature about Clements’ play, he was never actually charged with or convicted of murder.
alcohol level of .91. After an outcry from Buckner’s family, police launched an investigation into Jordan that uncovered his ongoing involvement in a series of dangerous and exploitative situations that mostly involved Aboriginal women from the Downtown Eastside and excessive and toxic amounts of alcohol. Jordan was eventually convicted of manslaughter in the Buckner case and served six years of a nine-year sentence. The deaths of the nine other women associated with Jordan were never prosecuted, and their families have never seen formal justice for the loss of their lives. Many people have speculated that the only reason Jordan was ever brought to justice in the Buckner case was due to the advocacy of her family, and the fact that she was not Aboriginal (Rose, Pemberton, and Sarti; Beatty). As her father stated in the *Vancouver Sun* (and as is quoted in the introductory materials to Clements’ play), Jordan “picked the wrong person. She was someone that someone cares about” (Rose, Pemberton, and Sarti A12). While the implicit suggestion that no one cared about the other nine women is likely greatly overstated, the fact that the justice and social systems failed them is certainly undeniable. Due to their addictions, economic marginality, and (some allege) their race, their deaths went unquestioned. This is likely the product of the same institutional and public derision that is evident in the case of the community’s missing women. Lavana Gentray, sister of Mary Johnson, one of the victims, has stated that she tried to get the police to investigate further as she suspected her sister’s death was murder. “I tried to talk to the authorities” she is quoted as saying, “but they weren’t interested in Mary at all” (A12).

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33 One could argue that police essentially used Aboriginal women as bait to ascertain the details of Jordan’s process, thereby reinscribing their status as consumable, disposable objects. While Jordan was under surveillance, police listened in as he plied another woman with alcohol, rescuing her just before she was poisoned (Rose, Pemberton, and Sarti A13). Consider, too, that Jordan was able to kill another woman after the death of Vanessa Lee Buckner but that he was never prosecuted for his involvement in that death.
The parallels between the police neglect of Gilbert Paul Jordan’s victims and the ongoing disappearances of women from the community are undeniable, especially when you consider the statements of the victims’ families. They register a litany of failed attempts to get official recognition of their concerns and continued systemic neglect by authorities, demonstrating that the silencing of Downtown Eastside women continues, even after their deaths. The critical necessity of voiced resistance – of bringing these stories into the public consciousness – is palpable when you consider the fact that between the time of Clements’ initial writing in 1997 and the premiere of the play in November of 2000, an additional thirty-one women went missing from the Downtown Eastside. These were the pressures to which *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* was responding, and to which the story of the play offers some small bit of resolution.

### 3.3 The Play: Dialogism, Community, and Resistance

A mother-daughter relationship serves as the through line for the complex story of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*. Rebecca, a writer, ventures to the Downtown Eastside in search of her mother Rita, Aunt Shadie as she is known on these streets. We meet Aunt Shadie in early scenes, as she crosses over into the world of ghosts that populate this play. She has been killed by ‘The Barber’, a man who preys on vulnerable women from the community by

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34 There is evidence that Robert Pickton killed 18 of these women, and he was convicted of second-degree murder in the case of three of their deaths. I have arrived at these numbers by comparing the list of missing women in Amber Dean’s 2009 dissertation *Hauntings* (4-7) to Wally Oppal’s descriptions of the lives of missing women from *Forsaken* (Volume 1, 32 – 76). I have isolated the disappearances of women from the Downtown Eastside in the 1997 – 2000 period to demonstrate the scale of violence against female community members that was ongoing at the time of Clements’ writing and reinforce that little public attention was being drawn to these ongoing disappearances at the time.

35 As I have not seen *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* staged, any reference to the play’s staging has been informed by a series of sources, including several reviews of the play and an interview with the play’s actors by Klisala Harrison. Sarah Banting’s article “Being There: Stage Presence and *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*” and Reid Gilbert’s “Marie Clements’s *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*: Denaturalizing Genre” were particularly helpful in understanding how the play was staged for its premiere at the Firehall Arts Centre.
poisoning them with alcohol. Aunt Shadie meets Rose on the other side, a British switchboard operator who helms the reception desk of a 1960s era hotel. As Rebecca searches Hastings Street and its bars for her mother, we are introduced to a series of women – the eventual victims of the Barber – who inhabit the isolated spaces and SROs of the Downtown Eastside. In this first act of the play, each woman seeks out some kind of connection – physically, emotionally, through the phone or in her mind – as she speaks to the audience from behind a scrim, which implies her isolation. In the final scenes of the first act the women’s deaths, while not represented on stage, are signaled through a series of textual projections. As the first act ends the women move out of their isolated spaces, and join together with Aunt Shadie and Rose in song forming a community of the dead. Banded together in death, the women are able to affect the real world, setting in motion a series of events that will bring Rebecca and the Barber together. They steal her wallet and leave it for him to find as their song of community comes to a crescendo. In the second act, the women’s ghosts focalize around Rebecca and move with her into her life in a Vancouver suburb. Here, the women form a real community, as they joke and laugh and share with each other about their lives and their deaths. Eventually, they return to the Downtown Eastside with Rebecca as she meets the Barber to retrieve her lost wallet. When the Barber tries to victimize Rebecca as well, the women act together to protect her. All together, the women bring a knife to the Barber’s throat, avenging their murders and asserting their agency.

According to Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* is “a powerful political critique that links overarching Native, feminist, environmental, anti-colonial and class-based concerns with a specific and localized attack on systemic racism and sexism in a justice system that has consistently turned its back on the serial murder of women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside” (363). While the complexity of the play’s political critiques
are well established by Mojica, Knowles, and many others, for my part, I am interested in the *how* of this text. I argue that the way the play simultaneously activates such a complex series of social and political registers and referents is through dialogism. Returning for a moment to Bakhtin, recall that dialogism is a linguistic, literary and social recognition that meaning is always inevitably multifarious. Through the dialogic, we can challenge static or accepted definitions and discursive formations, as we recognize that the meaning behind a given word or utterance is always multiple, competing, socially determined, and ever changing. *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* engages with the idea that the social and political systems that ignored and silenced the women are part of an authoritative monologic discourse. Ongoing systemic silence of marginal women from the community is the status quo, which has been accepted by the public and is illustrated in the repeated indifference to the community’s circumstances and concerns. To challenge this monologic discursive imperative, the play relies on a series of complex representational strategies that destabilize linearity and activate the dialogic. According to Bakhtin, the dialogic can be actualized through several techniques; or, we could say, certain attendant features of a text would signal the presence of a destabilizing dialogic drive within it. These include double-voicing, quotation, carnivalization and embedding – all of which, to a greater or lesser degree, exist within *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*. As I will discuss throughout the remainder of this chapter the play depicts a fictional world in which monologic power, in the form of the Barber, has not succeeded in silencing the marginal women who populate this play. Rather, the women challenge him, discovering their own power and agency through connection and community.

36 See Banting, Couture, Gilbert, or LaFlamme.
Marie Clements has noted several times that *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* was specifically born out of her response to the 1988 *Vancouver Sun* exposé by Rose, Pemberton, and Sarti about ‘the boozing barber’ – as Jordan came to be known – and his victims. In an interview with Ginny Ratsoy, Clements specifically comments on the anger she felt reading that editorial. When asked about the play’s inspiration, she says: “it came from the four page spread I read in *The Vancouver Sun* in 1988… I guess what really put me over was that it was a huge spread on him and maybe half a page of all of his victims […], very little was said of them as human beings” (475). According to Clements, the play became a reaction to the fact “that so much was said about him and very, very little on the women themselves” (Harrison 272), as the women “had no story as far as the world was concerned, other than what [he] had done to them” (Grace and Wasserman, 329). For indeed, the 1988 *Sun* article provides very little detail as to the women’s lives, focusing mostly on the circumstances of their deaths while dedicating almost four full pages to the perpetrator’s life story and criminal history. With Clements’ anger at this representational injustice fuelling it, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* was written as a response to the cultural silence and invisibility of this particular group of women – a cultural silence that, in part, lead to their deaths.38

*The Unnatural and Accidental Women* was, from its inception, then, a dialogical project, as Clements responded to both the social and archival silence around the deaths of these ten

37 I am not trying to vilify Rose, Pemberton, and Sarti’s article, nor am I trying to vilify journalism about the Downtown Eastside in general. Journalism has played an important role in activism for the community: in the case of both Jordan and Pickton, journalists were the first ones to bring attention to patterns of deaths or disappearances. I am, however, pointing to a wider cultural lack of interest in murdered and missing women from the Downtown Eastside that Clements critiques. While the women were present in Rose, Pemberton, and Sarti’s article, their presence was so limited that they almost seem like a mere footnote to the sensational story of Gilbert Paul Jordan.

38 It is testament to the enduring silence and invisibility of Jordan’s victims that upon his death in 2006, all of Canada’s major newspapers ran detailed obituaries for Jordan that editorialized his crime career. See, for example, Tom Hawthorn’s article in *The Globe and Mail*. In contrast, representations of his victims’ lives remain limited to a single paragraph each in the 1988 *Vancouver Sun* report and the fictionalized characters in this play.
women. The play was crafted by engaging with (and, by extension, challenging) the cultural archive. She searched out as many details about the women as she could, and built new, fictional characters inspired by the archival materials she found (Harrison 272). Thus, the few details of the women’s lives that are available have made their way into the play: Verna in the play, Velma in real life, had a birthday gift to give to her son; Rose, or Ivy Rose in real life, was a British immigrant and switchboard operator; Edna Marie Shade was called “Auntie” by locals, and hence, in Clements’ play, is Aunt Shadie. This is a kind of historical double-voicing or a (re)voicing of the details of the women’s lives through fiction. The 1988 Vancouver Sun editorial mostly reduces the women to the details of their deaths; the words ‘naked’ ‘bruised’ and ‘alcoholic’ are repeated over and over again in the coverage. In contrast, Clements’ version of events, while fictional, challenges the official story that is born out in that prior representation of the women. Her story, instead, explores the small instances of humanity that makes these characters who they are. The play crafts lives for the women beyond what Jordan did to them while simultaneously denying him any representational space. We know very little about the Barber of the play, other than that he is a man who preys on the needs and vulnerabilities of women, and that those women kill him in the end. Through her characters, Clements explores the women’s needs and desires, their humour and their wit. Thus, the female characters in the play are fictionalized versions of the historical record. I employ the word ‘fictionalized’ here and not merely ‘fictional’ to signal Clements’ active process of engagement with this history and her extrapolation of it into the play. The female characters straddle the boundaries between the real world and the fictional one of the play, thus allowing them to reference both the actual women who were murdered by Gilbert Paul Jordan and to become symbolic analogues for other women who have been victimized in the Downtown Eastside. Fictionalizing the women’s names, in
particular, allows them to become symbolic stand-ins, rather than caricatures of the women themselves. As such ‘The Women,’ the term used in the play to describe their existence as a group, comes to dialogically engage with multiple but related identities: the characters of the play, the victims of Gilbert Paul Jordan, and the women who continued to go missing from the community as the play was staged. The play, while simultaneously activating these referents, argues for representations of the women that do not flatten them into a single static entity, but allow them to exist in multiplicity, together. The play presents characters whose humanity is affirmed on stage, both in the realm of the play, and in how they affect their audience. Critics have variously described this quality of the female characters as their ‘presence,’ or their ‘vibrance,’ highlighting how these women come to life and prominence through the stage (Banting, Gilbert, Wunker). But it is more than that, somehow. The women are humanized in Clements’ treatment, in contrast to their representation in the article by Rose, Pemberton and Sarti, and in contrast to the missing women’s posters. The women of the play are reclaimed from the static and reductive representations of the media, and given the space to be. They become full, rounded, flawed and funny people: people who speak and take up space; people who are recognized and heard; people with agency who can and do effect change in the end.

Clements further extrapolates the relationship between past and present by literally representing parts of the archive on stage, in some cases, quoting directly from it. Before the play itself even begins, the introductory material to the text of The Unnatural and Accidental Women includes a series of intertexts from the 1988 Sun article (8). They are all direct quotations from...
the article, and Clements even provides the title and date of the piece so that her readers might return to that document if compelled to. Similarly, Sarah Banting points out that at the play’s premiere, clippings from the 1988 *Sun* article hung on the walls of the Firehall Arts Centre’s foyer. From the outset, then, whether reading or watching, we are alerted to the fact that we are engaged in a dialogic intertextual and inter-historical process. Throughout the play’s first act, these embedded references continue to appear in complex scenes of performative intertextuality. Details of each woman’s death, taken from the 1988 *Sun* article, are projected onto scrims hung on the stage. These visual cues announce the woman’s movement from the physical world of the Downtown Eastside into the ghostly community of the dead that haunts the play’s second act. In the text these interventions are announced with the word “SLIDE” in bold. “SLIDE: Marilyn Wiles, 40. Died December 04, 1984 with a 0.51 blood-alcohol reading. An inquiry at the time concluded Wiles’ death was ‘unnatural and accidental’” (58). Several of the slides – seven out of ten of them – quote directly from the article, which, in turn, quotes police or coroner’s reports. This multilayered reportage links the audience member (viewer or reader) right back to the real-world events. Generally, Clements alters the name and date of death of the woman described in the excerpt. In the slide for the character named Valerie, though, the only thing that has been changed is the woman’s name. “SLIDE: Valerie Nancy Homes, 33. Died November 19, 1986 with a 0.04 blood alcohol reading. ‘Jordan arrived at the Vancouver police station with his lawyer to report the death. He said he and Homes had been drinking for two days’” (51). Everything else in this excerpt remains true to the facts of Veronica Norma Harry’s death. Note, too, that this slide includes the play’s only direct reference to Jordan. Clements has resisted naming him elsewhere, as he is otherwise referred to as ‘The Barber’ or, in the play’s final scenes, as ‘Gilbert’. The use of a ‘real’ quotation here marks a rupture in the fictional landscape
that highlights the dialogic nature of the relationship between the play and the archive, the play and the history, and the play and the Downtown Eastside community. By extension, it implicates the audience of a fictional play in a process of witnessing of a very real community history. Clements’ use of this history, then, is not merely an archival device; it is a (re)presentation of that history that projects a sharp social critique into the present spatio-temporal moment of her audience. Through its inter- and extra-textual dialogic elements, the play comes to activate and reference various registers for its viewer. It is in this complexity that we, the readers and audience, are asked to do the work of making connections.

From the very outset of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, we are alerted to the importance of connecting by way of a series of telecommunications metaphors. Characters reach out from their isolation in the Downtown Eastside through phone calls, and one of the stage’s central objects is Rose’s switchboard. In the play’s first interaction between ghost-women, Rose and Aunt Shadie meet at the reception desk that houses Rose’s switchboard. Rose and her switchboard signal the importance of interaction and the functional necessity of the reciprocal relationship between voices. It is one thing to speak, her switchboard implies, but it is another to actually connect and/or be heard. Consider the actual function and operation of a switchboard: this now antiquated piece of technology very literally enabled interactions between voices and thus facilitated dialogue. Rose describes her job as a motherly and healing one, highlighting the deeply human need to be heard. Rose further suggests that in communication there is the opportunity to learn: at the core of her work she hopes to help people “bring about” what she calls “the pure answer” (19). I read Rose’s switchboard as a metaphor for the play itself. It, and she, are “in between people connecting” (19), just as the stage is between the characters and the audience to whom they speak. The space of the theatre is a germane, liminal space that has the
potential to effect connection. Like Rose at the helm of her switchboard, the audience is being asked to reach out and plug in the cable, to complete the circuit that might allow dialogue to occur between the lives and stories they are witnessing and themselves.

Still, though, Rose registers the limitations of this metaphor. Theatre, or, by extension, the arts, for all their attempts to connect people, may not actually be able to do anything. She states that she is always “trying…going through the motions on the switchboard but in the end, [she is] just…there[,] always it seems just listening to voices looking for connection” (19). Rose highlights the limitations of witnessing, as she recognizes that the beeping cries from her switchboard grow louder, but that there’s nothing she can do. However, it is not just Rose’s personal inability that hinders her from action. In Rose’s ongoing interactions with Mavis, another of the play’s murdered women, she highlights the institutional factors that limit her. Mavis asks Rose to connect her call to an old friend; Rose, unsure of the ‘house rules’ about such an action, does not immediately proceed. Mavis then asks Rose: “what kind of house are you in where people call and you don’t help them?” (23). Here, Mavis implicitly references the colonial, classist politics at work in the ongoing silence of marginal people, like those who reside in the Downtown Eastside. As the only non-Aboriginal woman in the play, Rose is repeatedly aligned with the symbols and structures of colonialism. It is telling that, for all of Rose’s insistence on the importance of connecting, her actual ability to put people in touch is flawed. Never does she actually put a call through to its intended recipient. She is part of an antiquated system that values connection in theory, but does not actually effect it in practice. Once Rose moves out from behind her switchboard and gives up her prim British ways, she is welcomed by the other women and becomes part of their community. It is worth noting that Rose’s switchboard is supposed to sit on an upper register above the stage and therefore dominates the
visual hierarchy of the play. In the second act though, while the stage directions are not explicit, it seems as though she moves out of this higher visual register and comes to be on one plain with the rest of the women by the play’s conclusion.

Mavis’ interactions through the phone provide us with more reminders of the need for connection and its continued interruption in conventional public perceptions of the Downtown Eastside. Mavis sits in her room at the Glenaird Hotel, in a big armchair looking through her address book and lovingly “reminiscing about each entry” (22). She repeatedly attempts to make contact with her loved ones and, by extension, to reach out past the isolation of this single room. She is trying to be heard, and, by extension, emotionally validated, but the link she so craves can never be achieved. As she tries to call her friend Mona, there is no answer; the phone just continues “ringing empty” (24). Mavis speaks over the sound of the ringing phone: “(Ring) Hi, Mona, I just thought… (ring)…got to thinking of you and thought I’d call. Actually I just thought I’d call ‘cause (ring) I wondered if you and Bill might be coming into town sometime” (23). In another scene she tries calling her sister only to get an answering machine instead of a person. Part of Clements’ message here, I think, is that the women’s isolation is part of what puts them at risk. Try as she might, all of Mavis’ avenues for connection are stalled and broken.

For Mavis, it is partly the phone and her unreciprocated need for connection that spells her demise. A call comes through that she expects to be Rose, but instead there is a male voice at the other end of the line who tells her to leave her room and go downstairs to get a call from her sister. Excited at the possibility of interaction, Mavis hurries out, only to find it was a ruse. When she returns to her room there is a man in her chair. “Can I get you a drink?” (56) he asks. We then hear a voiceover recording repeating the familiar words of a broken connection: “if you need help, just hang up and dial your operator… if you need help, just hang up and dial your
As Rose has already alerted us, however, simply calling the operator is not enough – she cannot help. We realize there is nothing Rose can do as we shortly see the details of Mavis’ death projected upon the stage (57). It is not until after death, as the women form a community and begin to share their stories and lives, that telecommunications begin to work for them. Aunt Shadie calls the group of women who now reside at Rebecca’s apartment, while Mavis is able to contact her dead family members. The ability to reach out and actually forge connections is part of the women’s progression into community and part of their burgeoning agency that builds to completion in the play’s closing revenge scene.

If the women become increasingly connected as the play progresses, the Barber remains relatively static. The Barber is part of the same “skid row” community of alcoholics in the Downtown Eastside as the women, but he occupies a more powerful position in the social hierarchy of the neighbourhood than his victims, which he exploits in order to harm them. While he is not, then, indicative of police, government or state power, he can be understood as a representation of monologic authority and control. Consider that he is white, male, and a business owner, standing in sharp contrast to the women’s varied, racialized, marginal, heterogeneous identities. In the first act the Barber’s dominance over the women is established by repeating the same words over and over again. In a series of scenes titled “The Barbershop Quartet” (25, 45, 53) we watch as the Barber authoritatively coaxes three women into death. The Barber is dressed in “hyper whites” (25) as he places a bottle to Marilyn’s lips and says, “Down the hatch, baby. Twenty bucks if you drink it right down. Down the hatch, baby. Right down – finish it right down” (26). It should be noted that this is yet another instance of intertextuality, as these are Gilbert Paul Jordan’s actual words reported by the Vancouver Police in 1987 and quoted in the Vancouver Sun in 1988 (Rose, Pemberton, and Sarti A13).
the next Barbershop Quartet scene Marilyn has been reduced to shadow in the mirror, while Penny, the Barber’s next victim, now sits in his chair. He brings a bottle to her lips and climbs on top of her, repeating almost exactly the same words. “Down the hatch, baby. Twenty bucks if you drink it right down. Down the hatch, baby. Drink it right down” (46) he says. In each of the scenes the Barber escalates his physical violence toward the women. He struggles with Patsy, the final woman in this tableau, as Marilyn and Penny watch from the mirror’s reflection. He again repeats the same words this time finishing them emphatically: “Down the hatch, baby. DRINK IT – DROWN” (53). He emerges from the struggle and “covers [Patsy’s] body on the floor with his white cape” (53), walking away. In the play’s second act, while the Barber, now named Gilbert, speaks in words other than this repetitive monologue, his statements are all inflected with the same manipulative authority and aggression. His name change does not seem indicative of any kind of evolution on Gilbert’s part. Rather, I understand this movement between names to imply that he is a symbolic character in the first act, embodying the monologic and representing the myriad forms of oppression and violence that can harm women in the community. In the second act he becomes the particular man who murdered these ten women. In this sense, while he is still a silencing, authoritative force, he is part of the play’s dialogic community, demonstrating that the dialogic may not always be productive and generative.

It is important to note that in the Barbershop Quartet scenes Marilyn, Penny and Patsy do not speak. They have no voice and while they struggle with the Barber, they are not able to challenge his power. However, it is Marilyn, Penny, and Patsy who begin the song that is so integral to representing the women’s coming together in community and voice. As each woman dies in the barbershop, she sings. Their collective song and raised voices intensify through the final scenes of the first act. As the remaining women’s deaths are signaled, they all join Aunt
Shadie and Rose in the ghost world. Aunt Shadie calls to the women and welcomes them to the other side. The women “begin to emerge…as Aunt Shadie calls to them in song and they respond, in song, in rounds of their original languages” (58). The women are engaging in dialogue through song, as they each find their respective language and come together in death. This call and response continues as “the women in the barbershop call to each fallen woman in each solitary room” (58). The women respond in turn and “join… in song and ritual as they gather their voice, language and selves in the barbershop” (58). The women join together, moving from their disparate and isolated spaces into a community. They sing: “Do you hear me sister like yesterday today” as some women repeat and re-sing this same line in Cree: “Ke-peh-tat-in/jee/ne-gee-metch Das-goots/o-tahg-gos-ehk Ahnotes/ka-kee-se-khak” (58). The song continues on through the final scenes of the first act, as the women engage in heteroglossic call and response. Each line of the song is first sung in English and then in Cree creating a sense of linguistic double-voicing as the traditions and languages of both cultures come into contact and interaction.\(^\text{40}\) Clements and the premiere’s actors called this “the calling song” (Harrison) wherein the women call to each other and raise their voices in community. According to Clements, she intended the song to represent a “journey […] through their voices” (Harrison 274). She further states that the song enacts a process of “honouring each other” for the women, as they use the song to “hear each other, finally” (273), and hence, to forge the connections that they have craved all along.

\(^{40}\) Initially, the intent was to simultaneously sing ‘the calling song’ in different languages, i.e. each woman’s own language or dialect, specifically Cree, Salish and English (Harrison 279). Practical concerns of staging and translation, however, dictated that the number of languages be limited. As three of the victims were Cree, Clements states that she elected to employ that language as it allowed the characters to “reclaim” their “authentic language after death” (qtd. in Harrison 273).
It is in this performance that the murdered women of The Unnatural and Accidental
Women band together into a community of the dead, as all of their multiple voices are brought
into relationship with each other. By all accounts, when the play was first staged, the sonic effect
of all these voices was not a harmony. Columba Bobb, who played Valerie in the premiere, has
commented on the struggle of staging this varied ensemble of voices (Harrison 278). It was a
discordant song—different on different nights of performance—that was infused with the
emotion of the actors and the associated affective response of the audience (275). Remember, in
a Bakhtinian sense, the approach towards polyphony is not a movement towards harmony.
Rather it is a space where multiple voices are invoked, with each representing a different
consciousness, with each standing on its own. They are, however, linked and united in dialogic
relationship to each other. For Bakhtin, it is in this multiplicity that an ideal challenge to
monologism is achieved. In polyvocal community, the women become the destabilizing
heteroglot power that they could not be in life because they were divided and isolated in the
Downtown Eastside. Now, acting together as a community of individuals, they are able to
execute actions that have consequences in the real world of the play. The implication, of course,
is that the process of coming together in a polyvocal heteroglossic community might have some
effect upon the real world as well.

In the play’s final scenes, Rebecca finds herself alone in the Barbershop with Gilbert, and
she enacts a reversal of the ‘Barbershop Quartet’ scenes. Rebecca is in control as she holds a
razor to his throat. As Aunt Shadie stands behind her, “she puts her hand over Rebecca’s hand
and draws the knife closer to the Barber’s neck. He looks up and panics as he sees Aunt Shadie
and The Women […] behind her. Squirming, they slit his throat” (125). In their multiplicity, the
women are able to kill the man who silenced them and, by extension and implication, to break
down the system that subjugated them. Note, here, that while their victimizer has been named Gilbert throughout the second act, in these final moments, he reverts back to ‘the Barber.’ His death, then, can be construed first, as an act of self-defense on Rebecca’s part; next, as an act of revenge on the women’s parts; and, on a wider scale, a symbolic death of monologic authority and discursive power. Looking at this final scene of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* through a Bakhtinian lens, I cannot help but see the Barber’s death as a productive action brought on by the women’s polyvocal community. Symbolically, their multiplicity facilitates a dialogic reversal of high/low, dead/alive, power/powerless, wherein the women can finally act, defeating the oppressive monologic system represented by the Barber. The play offers a challenge to the familiar and expected narrative about women in this community as Rebecca lives on and walks away, “exit[ing] the barber shop” and walking away into “the wind and trees” (126). I am not arguing that the play advocates that power can only be achieved in death; nor is it saying that we should mete out justice by turning violence back onto its original perpetrators. Rather, the play presents a symbolic example of how community comes together in voice, and further, how that community can effect lasting changes upon the world. It is when they join together that the women have power. And then, even in death, they cannot be silenced.

While things are, of course, not quite so simple in the real world, the play contends that there is something generative and productive about acts of voiced resistance. I am reminded of the protests that occurred as the Murdered and Missing Women’s Commission of Inquiry began in downtown Vancouver in October of 2011. Community activists, including the organizers of the Memorial Women’s March, among many others, blocked off streets, and raised their voices in protest. According to media reports at the time, “their chants and drumming from the street were heard clearly in the courtroom as proceedings began” (Kieltya). Whether protesters had any
marked effect on the outcome of the inquiry one cannot know. They did, however, register their voices upon the judicial proceedings that occurred eight stories above them, and expressed their resistance to a process which they believed reinscribed the marginalization of community members by excluding their testimonies.

According to Erin Wunker, the audience of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* “acts as witness to the stories, and bears the ethical responsibility of recognition” (166) of this group of women. By virtue of its performance on stage, the play’s diffuse dialogic practices are able to affect the spectator. That spectator is then asked to engage dialogically with the multivalent social and political complexities with which s/he has been presented. As one reviewer put it, “this is theatre as ritual” wherein “audiences are asked to work as hard as the cast to make connections” (Al-Solaylee). Staging the play at the Firehall Arts Centre intensified the dialogic process of these connections, as people walked back out into the Downtown Eastside community after witnessing this story. At one point in the play Rebecca addresses the attitudes of outsiders to people who live in the Downtown Eastside. “People drive by in their nice cars and stare at people on those streets” (98) she says. These “nice people” end up looking away, because the thought of likening themselves to the residents of the Downtown Eastside scares them. They would prefer to think that “it’s happening to ‘those’ people. Even better if ‘those’ people are mentally ill or brown or addicted to one thing or another” (98), as this helps the “nice people in their nice cars” (98) to distance themselves from the reality of it all. Clements calls her audience out, critiquing a social system that ostracizes “those people” from the Downtown Eastside. Her audience, though, must walk back out into a street from which women had recently gone missing; they are thus implicated in the process of indifference and ignorance that the play critiques. Clements puts some of the responsibility for community and connection back in the
hands of her audience, as the play asks them: what will you do with this information now that you’ve heard and seen?

Over the decade following its premiere *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* continued to move out into the world. It was staged in 2004 in Toronto and the text version was published in 2005. The text is now studied in universities nationally, from First Nations literature classes to Women’s Studies and Social Justice courses, activating a continued series of dialogic interactions through education. The play continues to raise questions and facilitate discussion, not only about the social and institutional factors that allow the silence and marginalization of Aboriginal women to continue in this country, but about structures of and approaches to representations of these issues. *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* provides a framework for representational redress of violence in the Downtown Eastside through the dialogic. The various multiple angles, approaches, and layers of the play’s structure, all lead to one overriding message: something better resides in dialogue. Action and redress exist in a community that embraces multiplicity, that embraces dialogue, and that allows people to speak, be heard, and connect. The play argues for the power of community, of banding voices together to create that community, and for the ability to effect change once that community is together. Clements’ play gives the women – her characters, Jordan’s victims, *and* the community’s murdered and missing – a more meaningful place in the cultural canon than they had ever been accorded before. By ‘meaningful’ I mean a representation that is cognizant of the material and institutional conditions that led to the women’s marginalization, and one that is aware of their ongoing invisibility and voicelessness. Perhaps most importantly, though, by ‘a meaningful representation’ I mean that *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* presents the women as whole people – people whose stories are worthy of attention and space in our cultural landscape.
Chapter 4 - Conclusion

There are no easy definitions or answers to be had when it comes to representing a community as complex as the Downtown Eastside. The three texts I have considered in this thesis articulate one particular methodology for representing the community – albeit in very different ways. By attempting to capture the complexity of the Downtown Eastside, if even marginally, these dialogic texts offer productive opportunities for intervention upon dominant and accepted narratives about the community. There are, of course, many avenues that my argument leaves unexplored. Any of the other eight dialogic books that were produced about the Downtown Eastside between 2000 and 2010 would be productive to analyze in light of some of the theoretical, ethical, and representational questions raised here. While I have focused on voice and dialogue in representations of the community, one could similarly make a visual rather than auditory argument about the Downtown Eastside’s cultural production over (approximately) the same period. Photography projects about marginal and disenfranchised subjects, however, bring up a whole other set of ethical concerns. Are these books documenting the community in order to expose and challenge its marginality, or might they be exploiting community members’ suffering for spectacle? It would be engaging and productive to consider the increased photographic representations of the community that emerged concurrently with the dialogic texts, through books like Lincoln Clarkes’ Heroines (2001), Stan Douglas’ Every Building on 100 West Hastings (2002), Michael Barnholden and Lindsay Mearns’ Street Stories: 100 Years of Homelessness in Vancouver (2007), and Gabor Gasztonyi’s A Room in the City (2010).

Post-2010 representations of the Downtown Eastside have continued to be produced at a staggering rate in comparison to the pre-2000 era. Figure 4.1 (page 76) demonstrates the continued cultural production about the community by adding films, art projects and institutional
reports to the already long list of books that opened this thesis. While this is certainly not an exhaustive list, the graph is intended to demonstrate that the fascination with this space persists, across genres. The conjoined ideas of voice, multiplicity, and dialogue have also continued to persist in cultural production about the community, again, across all genres. As far as the literature of the community is concerned, it continues to employ dialogic metaphors and it continues to be celebrated. The Thursday’s Writing collective published *V6A: Writing from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside*, edited by John Asfour and Elee Kraljii Gardiner in 2012. This anthology of work from both emerging and established writers tries to capture the community through its literary multiplicity, and was a finalist for the Vancouver Book Award. Amber Dawn’s recent collection *How Poetry Saved My Life: A Hustler’s Memoir* invokes the metaphor of ‘having a voice’ throughout. A former sex-worker, Dawn’s introduction to her collection invokes all the language that my analysis is interested in: voices, silence, listening, dialogue, activism – they are all here. According to Dawn, “to listen to and include sex workers’ voices in dialogue is a skill that we have not yet developed, just as we have not learned how to include the voices of anyone who does not conform to accepted behaviours or ideas” (13). The collection was celebrated, and won the Vancouver Book award for 2013. In her acceptance speech Dawn stated: “Please let my voice be only one that we listen to. Please let my story be one of many that we celebrate” (Canadian Press).

Dawn’s assertion that we have not yet learned to listen struck a chord with me. In a way, the explosion of texts from the Downtown Eastside in recent years would refute her claim. Voices exist in cacophony about this community, or so the representations seem to contend. If she is right, though, and we have not yet begun to listen, then I cannot help but wonder if the concept of ‘dialogue’ could eventually become an empty signifier. Perhaps ‘dialogue’ as a way
to represent voices in multiplicity and diversity has become so ubiquitous in cultural production about the Downtown Eastside that it is slowly becoming the typical narrative about the community. Has it been invoked to the point that it is now a mere trope? Do all the multiple voices now risk becoming a monotonous drone?

Or, if ‘we,’ as a culture, have not yet learned to listen, then maybe there are still productive reasons to invoke this dialogic form in the service of activism for social justice. Perhaps if the Downtown Eastside keeps speaking, people must learn to listen. If, as Dawn implies, listening is a skill we need to hone, then the dialogic processes that these books invoke can help facilitate that education. I have argued, throughout this thesis, for the importance and power of the Downtown Eastside’s voices in these books, yet those voices remain, for the most part, absent presences in my work. While I, as a literary critic, can try to draw your attention to the formal and social trends that precipitated the production of these books, I cannot do the voices of the Downtown Eastside justice, nor can I capture the multivalent concerns with which they are inflected. For that, you need to turn to the books themselves. I encourage you to go find them, to open them, to read them, and to engage with the voices, allowing what they say to challenge you and your assumptions.

My interest in the Downtown Eastside’s cultural production is born out of a will to understand how the community is being represented in our cultural imagination. Are the representations changing? If they are, will social policy eventually follow? When I first started doing the research for this project, I was optimistic that the explosion of Downtown Eastside literature post-2000 was indicative of changing attitudes about the community’s members. As I have now spent two years immersed in the cultural production about the community, I remain unsure about whether or not anything has actually changed – or whether it will, or whether it
even can. As Ian taught me long ago, though, and as the three texts I examine argue, the
important work lies in the discussions, interactions, and dialogue. While the outcomes that might
emerge from those connections cannot be anticipated, this does not lessen their value. I will
continue to connect, to create dialogue, and to challenge our assumptions about the Downtown
Eastside and its narratives, in order to challenge our social systems and conceits.
Figure 4.1 Representing Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, 1975 – 2013
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