

*The derelict, the deserving poor, and the lumpen:
A history of the politics of representation in the Downtown Eastside*

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Immediately to the left of Stan Douglas's *Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971*, a series of portraits and quotations proposes an interpretation of the Woodward's site and its historical significance. Adorning the entrance to one of the chain stores, they depict local residents and their answers to questions such as, "What do you think of the changes going on in the area?" and "What do you think about the Woodward's development?" Considering that the piece was created by the developers, it is unsurprising that it offers a sunny interpretation. The carefully chosen faces of marginalized Downtown Eastside residents, new middle-class arrivals, and community leaders all speak of the positive impacts of the new development and the ongoing gentrification of the neighbourhood. Couched in the language of "social mix," their quotations extol the virtues of "diversity," misleadingly implying that the Downtown Eastside—one of the most diverse neighbourhoods in the city—somehow lacked diversity in the past. The quotes trumpet the social housing component of Woodward's, even though the number of housing units is a fraction of what community groups argued was necessary. And they make fallacious claims that the new businesses are employing Downtown Eastside residents and helping them to "get off the streets"—as if the problem of poverty in the Downtown Eastside was the result of too few minimum-wage jobs.



Abbott & Cordova, 7 August 1971. Stan Douglas (2009). Digital Photograph in Glass. Installed in the Atrium of the Woodward's development, Vancouver. Used with Permission.



Untitled Portraits in the Atrium of the Woodward's Building. 2010. Photo by Author.

Writing on Douglas's piece in the *Walrus*, Leigh Kamping-Carder¹ remarks that real-estate developers often forget that neighbourhoods like the Downtown Eastside are palimpsests—spaces continuously written over by different social groups throughout their history. Pace Kamping-Carder, what texts like those described in the previous paragraph suggest is that developers are in fact acutely aware of the histories of the places they seek to remake, at least insofar as it helps them sell condominiums. The quotations attributed to this all-too-perfect collection of faces are uncanny precisely because they seem to address every facet of the public discourse around Woodward's, seeking to reassure new property-owners that not only is their investment secure but that their very presence is beneficial to the community. The ideological centre of the text is found in a quote from "Ali", who, in giving his thoughts on how the neighbourhood will change, jokes, "[I]n five years, I won't be able to afford a coffee here." To the newly-arrived middle class being hailed by this discourse, the message is clear: *Don't sweat the bad reputation; this place is going to be worth a fortune.*

It is in this politically contested space that we encounter Stan Douglas's *Abbott & Cordova*, a depiction of a 1971 riot in which police attacked a group of hippies protesting marijuana prohibition. It is a somewhat frivolous protest compared to the political struggles more commonly associated with the neighbourhood: the labour strife of the 1930s, the fight against urban renewal and demolition in the 1960s, or the struggles against gentrification (including the occupation of the Woodward's building itself) in 2002. Nevertheless, in this minor event located at the periphery of the protest movements of the 1960s, we encounter a powerful representation of the naked violence of the state brought to bear on a group of people.

What can be said about the politics of this image? What function does it perform here in the historically overdetermined space of the Woodward's building? On one level, *Abbott & Cordova* is a representation of a riot and can be read as a powerful indictment of state repression and police brutality, and as a defence of civil liberties during a time of social upheaval. In so far as it dredges up an uncomfortable past, the image offers an important corrective to sanitized histories of the neighbourhood that efface the traces of conflict from the palimpsest of the Downtown Eastside. We can also discern parallels between that historical period and our own, reading the piece as a reminder that such political struggles and violent repression continue, even if the issues and actors differ.

Conversely, we can read the piece looking not for similarities but differences and call attention to what might be effaced in this representation. In this reading, we look at the riot and ask: *Whose* riot?

¹ Leigh Kamping-Carder, "At the Gastown Riot," *The Walrus* (July-August, 2009); <http://www.walrusmagazine.com/articles/2009.07-profile-at-the-gastown-riot-stan-douglas-walrus-vancouver-art/>.

Which community is being represented? Hippies are not the first group that Vancouverites associate with the Downtown Eastside of the 1970s. They were, after all, only recent arrivals to the neighbourhood. The more iconic figures of the Downtown Eastside were the working-class men living in the neighbourhood's residential hotels—those men who look on like detached spectators from the peripheries of Douglas's mural. We are therefore entitled to ask about the important *class* differences between the middle-class protest depicted in *Abbott & Cordova* and the traditionally working-class politics of the Downtown Eastside. Indeed, why is it that in Woodward's, at the very site of the neighbourhood's most contentious battles over gentrification, we find the depiction of a riot concerned not with the politics of redistribution but the politics of (marijuana) consumption? Could we argue that *Abbott & Cordova* functions as a sort of gentrification of the political history of the Downtown Eastside? Could we even suggest that it somehow apologizes for the gentrification of Woodward's by providing an image of middle-class protest for the gentrifiers to identify with, thereby legitimizing their presence in the neighbourhood as the rightful inheritors of the legacy of the 1960s protest movement?²

This line of questioning likely goes too far, for it is clear that Douglas intends quite the opposite with the piece. It's clear that he intends this image of a notorious riot to facilitate a discussion about the contested history of the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, it is precisely because such a conversation is necessary that it is essential to pay attention to how class and class struggle are articulated in representations of the Downtown Eastside—especially when real estate developers are actively engaged in writing their own histories of the neighbourhood with the goal of making it safe for property speculation rather than political discussion.³

In the historical analysis that follows, I take up these issues of class, class struggle, and the politics of representation. Following Douglas's remark that *Abbott & Cordova* concerns a moment of transition

² I argue that it is precisely this sort of middle-class, counter-cultural identification that condo marketer Bob Rennie was aiming at when he enjoined prospective Woodward's buyers to "be bold, or move to suburbia." Rennie Marketing Systems, *Woodward's District*. <http://www.woodwardsdistrict.com>, 2006. The slogan has since been removed from the website; a supplementary reference to the slogan can be found in: Tim Carlson, "Condofest," *Vancouver Review* no. 10, Summer 2006; http://www.vancouverreview.com/past_articles/condofest.htm.

³ The necessity of such analyses is made clear by another representation offered by the developers of Woodward's. In a didactic panel (located on the Hastings side of the building) discussing the history of Woodward's, they appear to argue that the Woodward's development represents the *successful* culmination of the 2002 "Woodsquat" occupation of the Woodward's building by activists and homeless people. Given that many activists view Woodward's as the complete *failure* of their struggle against gentrification, this argument should be read as an attempt at ideological recuperation whereby a history of opposition is co-opted by the victors. With respect to my claim that the developers are not interested in fostering political discussion, it is also worth noting that the Woodward's building has repeatedly refused Simon Fraser University students—who attend school in the building—the right to hold protests on campus.

for the neighbourhood, I discuss a series of interrelated transitions that have had profound effects on the Downtown Eastside. Such transitions have had equally powerful effects for political efforts to improve the lives of the people who live here. The central transition I am concerned with is representational: it is the transformation of public discourse about the Downtown Eastside primarily as a result of political struggle from a variety of groups within the community. Specifically, I focus on the articulation of a discourse of “working-class community” by the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA) in the 1970s and 1980s as a reaction to the earlier language of “skid row” and the subsequent challenges that discourse has faced since then. This latter transition is tied to an important demographic shift in the neighbourhood: the diminishing numbers of retired resource workers who once populated the neighbourhood’s hotels. As a result of this shift, there have been changes in the political actors who have been able to successfully articulate a narrative of the neighbourhood. In this case I chart the shift in power from DERA in the 1980s to the Portland Hotel Society (PHS) in the present day. Entwined in these transformations are a host of others: transitions from industrial to post-industrial, from alcohol to heroin and then to crack, and from the “respectable” working-class to the “undeserving” *lumpenproletariat*.

The area now known as the Downtown Eastside was Vancouver’s original town site. Comprised of a number of distinctive sub-areas, including Gastown, Chinatown, and Strathcona, it extends as far east as Clark Drive and abuts the central business district in the west.⁴ The “Granville town site,” as it was named by royal surveyors in 1870, was built on a beach called *Luk’luk’i*, a seasonal food-gathering settlement of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh, and Musqueam First Nations.⁵ Chosen because of its proximity to the nearby Stamp’s Mill, the town site was organized around resource extraction and processing, activities which grew and persisted well into the twentieth century. An industrial waterfront emerged in the area comprised of canneries, warehouses, grain elevators, dockyards, and rail yards alongside a lodging-house district centred on Carrall and Cordova streets. Here, the loggers, miners, and migrant labourers of the hinterland found temporary accommodation in the numerous rooming hotels after returning from months of isolation in remote work camps. Beer parlours, cafés,

⁴ The boundaries of the Downtown Eastside have been the subject of a great deal of politicized debate, with community groups fighting against government and real estate developers, often for the simple recognition of the neighbourhood’s existence. When I speak of the Downtown Eastside, I employ the definition advanced by neighbourhood groups (and eventually adopted by the city), but by and large limit my discussion to the lodging-house areas of Gastown, Oppenheimer, and the Hastings corridor.

⁵ City of Vancouver, “Carrall Street Greenway: Natural History,” http://vancouver.ca/engsvcs/streets/greenways/city/carrall/history_natural.htm.

and other businesses catering to these mobile, single men abounded in the dense few blocks around Maple Tree Square, which soon became known as the loggers' district.⁶

As the city grew, affluent Vancouverites moved farther west, away from the sights and pungent smells of the industrial waterfront, making the Downtown Eastside the centre of the city's working class. With its concentration of hard-working and hard-living men, the neighbourhood quickly acquired a reputation for being a rough part of town.⁷ Widespread unemployment during the Great Depression did nothing to help this situation, and the neighbourhood also became known for confrontation after a series of violent clashes between police and unemployed men: striking longshoremen clashed with police at Ballantyne Pier in 1935, and, in a series of conflicts, groups of unemployed men occupied numerous public buildings including the Carnegie Library, the Hudson's Bay Company, the Post Office, and Art Gallery at different times throughout the 1930s.⁸

While the war-time recovery of Vancouver's economy cooled tempers somewhat, the economic recovery did not include the Downtown Eastside. Expansion of the highway system changed the dynamics of transportation such that waterfront industries could now relocate to cheaper land in the suburbs. The closure of the Union Steamship docks at the foot of Carrall Street and nearby North Shore ferries, as well as the end of streetcar transport along Cordova and Hastings around this time, also contributed to a massive decrease in pedestrian traffic through the neighbourhood.⁹

The neighbourhood—with its cheap hotels and beer parlours filled with working-class men—had long been associated with vices such as drinking, prostitution, and the racialized anxieties surrounding the gambling and opium “dens” of Chinatown. In the 1950s, with the neighbourhood in profound economic decline, these moral anxieties coalesced into a language of “skid row.”¹⁰ Residents of the Downtown Eastside were now characterized as deviants, derelicts, and criminals in local media, and stories of alcoholism, drug use, and violence filled the newspapers. The

⁶ Rolf Knight, *Along the No. 20 Line: Reminiscences of the Vancouver Waterfront* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1980), 29–30.

⁷ Jeff Sommers, “Men at the Margin: Masculinity and Space in Downtown Vancouver, 1950–1986,” *Urban Geography* 19 no. 4 (1998), 292–293.

⁸ Schlomo Hassan and David Ley, “The Downtown Eastside: 100 Years of Struggle,” in *Neighbourhood Organizations and the Welfare State*, Hassan and Ley, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 174

⁹ Larry Campbell, Neil Boyd, and Lori Culbert, *A Thousand Dreams: Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and the Fight for its Future* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2009), 12; City of Vancouver, “Carrall Street Greenway: Evolution of the Communities,” http://vancouver.ca/engsvcs/streets/greenways/city/carrall/history_evol.htm

¹⁰ Sommers, “Men at the Margin,” 296.

neighbourhood itself became a “square mile of vice”¹¹ whose “canned-heaters, drug addicts” and “streetwalkers”¹² were described in lurid detail by the press.

The rooming houses and residential hotels in these years housed a large number of retired resource workers.¹³ The men who had once stayed in the neighbourhood during the off-season or between jobs were now settled there permanently, making up a large and stable percentage of the community. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, new social groups began to arrive, including transient men, First Nations people, and younger substance abusers.¹⁴ Heroin also appeared around this time and a nascent street-drug scene emerged on the corner of Main and Hastings streets. The three decades following World War II thus saw a continued deterioration in the neighbourhood. A number of factors—including the end of the streetcar service that brought pedestrians to the neighbourhood, increasing suburbanization (affecting traditional downtown retailers like Woodward’s), and the arrival of new groups of very poor people in the Downtown Eastside—all contributed to the production of an economically depressed neighbourhood with increasingly pressing social problems.

These problems were defined in terms of “blight” and “urban decay” by city planners and gave rise to proposals for “urban renewal” to change the neighbourhood. Consistent with the planning ideology of the 1960s, such proposals often took the form of large-scale demolition and high-rise construction. Project 200, put forward in 1965 by a coalition of business and government forces, proposed fourteen new office towers and a massive freeway expansion that would demolish most of Gastown and Chinatown.¹⁵ The proposal sparked opposition from a wide variety of groups including Strathcona property owners, Downtown Eastside social workers, and heritage preservationists, who eventually succeeded in preventing the plan from being realized.¹⁶ So, while social problems were deepening at the time of the 1971 riot depicted in Douglas’s photograph, the Downtown Eastside was still a relatively stable working-class community entering the decade on a wave of successful community organizing and resistance.

¹¹ W.L. MacTavish, “Poverty Row in Vancouver is Square Mile of Vice,” *Windsor Daily Star*, (July 10, 1947), 1, http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=nxw_AAAAIBA&sjid=hE8MAAAAIBA&pg=3895%2C1223589.

¹² “Vancouver Police Search ‘Skid Row,’” *Montreal Gazette* (July 17, 1951), 13, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=94QtAAAAIBA&sjid=JjkFAAAAIBA&dq=skid%20row%20vancouver&pg=7121%2C2152554>.

¹³ Sommers, “Men at the Margin,” 296.

¹⁴ Hassan and Ley, “The Downtown Eastside,” 175

¹⁵ Jeff Sommers and Nicholas Blomley, “The Worst Block in Vancouver,” in *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, edited by Reid Shier. (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002), 35; Heather Smith, “Planning, Policy and Polarisation in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside,” *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 94, no. 4 (2003), 497.

¹⁶ One important strategy in the fight against Project 200 was the 1971 heritage designation of Gastown. On this point see Smith, “Planning, Policy and Polarisation ...” 501.

The Downtown Eastside Residents Association was officially incorporated in 1973. Modelled as a sort of trades-union for low-income people, it was the product of unique period in the history of the Canadian welfare state, when governments attempted to assimilate oppositional movements, such as those that had opposed Project 200, by granting them official status and providing them with funds.¹⁷ Initially headed by Bruce Eriksen, a Downtown Eastsider who had spent his working life in resource and industrial jobs, DERA quickly proved to be too politically confrontational to benefit from this largess of the state. Only three years later, when their funding was rejected by city council in 1976, DERA had already grown to 2,000 members and had embarrassed the municipal government on many occasions through rallies, pickets, and raucous appearances at council.¹⁸ The object of these actions was consistent: to improve the living conditions of their membership, the retired resource workers living in the neighbourhood's residential hotels. DERA framed their demands using the discourse of equality, arguing for equal enforcement of the law in the Downtown Eastside as was expected in other parts of the city. An important aspect of this demand was the enforcement of building codes and fire regulations, bylaws that were frequently ignored in the dilapidated hotels of the Downtown Eastside, often with disastrous consequences for those who lived in them. In 1973 alone, there were 107 hotel fires in the neighbourhood, which claimed the lives of ten people.¹⁹ DERA's membership and influence continued to grow throughout the 1980s, with the organization claiming 4,500 members in 1989 and two of its executive, Bruce Eriksen and Libby Davies, making the leap to formal politics when they were elected to city council early in the decade.

At the same time as DERA was making real progress in organizing residents and lobbying on their behalf, economic and social decline continued in the neighbourhood. The deinstitutionalization of significant numbers of mentally-ill patients from Riverview hospital, often without adequate support systems, led to many of these people moving to the Downtown Eastside in search of affordable accommodations. The neighbourhood's heroin trade also grew explosively throughout the 1970s, and the 1980s saw the arrival of crack cocaine, which only compounded the neighbourhood's problems with addiction.

Gentrification in other parts of the city, such as Kitsilano, Fairview, and the West End, which saw the conversion of single room occupancy (SRO) accommodations to middle-class apartments, put

¹⁷ Sommers, "Men at the Margin," 305.

¹⁸ Hassan and Ley, "The Downtown Eastside," 181, 186.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 192.

additional pressure on the neighbourhood to absorb the city's low-income singles.²⁰ These problems came to a head in the lead-up to Vancouver's hosting of the World Exposition in 1986 (Expo '86). The Expo grounds' proximity to the Downtown Eastside raised concerns that a high-profile mega-event would have disastrous effects for the neighbourhood through upwards pressure on rents and increased real-estate speculation. DERA raised the alarm early on that Downtown Eastside hotel owners intended to convert their properties to tourist accommodation and evict long-term tenants, many of whom had lived there for decades. Pressure on city council to enact rent freezes and moratoriums on conversions fell on deaf ears, and Expo resulted in an estimated 500 to 950 tenants being evicted from their homes in the lead-up to the event.²¹ DERA was later successful, in part because of this tragedy, in pushing for legislation that extended tenant's rights to the men of the rooming hotels in 1989. Nevertheless, the Expo evictions had a destabilizing effect on an already changing community.²²

While much of DERA's efforts were directed at material struggles around tenants' rights and living standards, in important ways they were also concerned with issues of representation. The principle target was the discourse of "skid row" that had come to define the neighbourhood since the 1950s. Skid row described a space filled with transients and derelicts, a neighbourhood where the washed-up ended up. Against this popular image, which was endlessly repeated in the press and civic discourse, DERA advanced a counter narrative of working-class community, drawing on the collective history of the retired men who made up their membership. They emphasized the residential stability of the neighbourhood—the second highest in the city—and the deep connection many felt to the community.²³ Jeff Sommers discusses this process in terms of the production of a new dominant figure in the neighbourhood: where once the "derelict" had represented skid row, now stood the figure of the "retired resource worker."²⁴ By the mid-1980s, when the Expo evictions occurred, the success of DERA's rearticulation of the neighbourhood's inhabitants was evidenced in the appropriation of this figure by journalists: "[T]hey are blasters, loggers, union workers, old soldiers, fathers, mothers, grandparents ... They are poor now, but before their bodies grew old and began to break they were working to help build this country."²⁵ The most striking example of DERA's

²⁰ David Ley, *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 67.

²¹ Kris Olds, "Urban Mega-Events, Evictions and Housing Rights: The Canadian Case," *Current Issues in Tourism* 1 no. 1(1998), 13.

²² Smith, "Planning, Policy and Polarisation ...," 499.

²³ Hassan and Ley, "The Downtown Eastside" 190, 178.

²⁴ Sommers, "Men at the Margin," 300.

²⁵ Mark Hume, 1986 cited in Sommers, Jeff, "Men at the Margin," 299. See also the two most important texts in the production of this narrative: Rolf Knight's *Along the No. 20 line*, New Star Books, 1980, and J. Canning-

successes at the level of representation comes in the name of the neighbourhood itself: whereas the area was once referred to as “Skid Road,”²⁶ after a decade of discursive work, DERA had succeeded in renaming the neighbourhood as the Downtown Eastside, even receiving a citation to that effect from the mayor.²⁷

This transformation of the neighbourhood at the level of representation is one of DERA’s greatest legacies. The replacement of the figure of the derelict with that of the retired resource worker has been immensely important to the neighbourhood in its struggles for recognition and equal treatment under the law.²⁸ It should be apparent, however, that such an ideological re-articulation, while radical in its own way, is not without its problems. Principle among these is the reification of a very bourgeois binary between the deserving and undeserving poor. In many ways, DERA succeeded in winning support for its agenda in the larger political field only by mimicking the vocabulary and conceptual framework of Vancouver’s elite. In other words, DERA argued that Vancouverites were wrong to stigmatize the retired workers of the Downtown Eastside as derelicts on *empirical* grounds—because they weren’t really derelicts—rather than undermining the ideological framework itself and arguing that, derelicts or not, Downtown Eastsiders deserved equal treatment and recognition.²⁹

Jeff Sommers, drawing on Iris Marion-Young, argues that “the deployment of a rhetoric of community ... also produced a series of exclusions.” Counterpoised to the retired resource worker were the “criminals, drug addicts, and alcoholics” who preyed on the worthy poor and degraded the neighbourhood.³⁰ The representation that DERA advanced about the neighbourhood and its inhabitants, while successful in enfranchising many, was nevertheless a representation that did not

Dew *Hastings and Main: Stories from an Inner City Neighbourhood*, New Star Books, 1987, the latter a product of research by Carnegie Centre, itself a product of DERA’s lobbying (Sommers, 301).

²⁶ “Skid Road” is a Vancouver variant of the more common term “skid row”.

²⁷ Hassan, Schlomo and David Ley. “The Downtown Eastside: 100 Years of Struggle,” 190.

²⁸ There were, of course, more concrete achievements as well, such as the remarkable amount of social housing DERA succeeded in having built in the neighbourhood.

²⁹ Some may argue that DERA’s language was not always exclusionary and did in fact “hail” the very groups I am claiming they positioned as “outsiders.” DERA produced a great deal of texts over its tenure, some of which may contradict my claim. Doubtlessly, many of the struggles they undertook (for example, in fighting for enforcement of fire codes in hotels) certainly benefited everyone in the Downtown Eastside. Nevertheless, there are numerous examples that speak to the distinction I am identifying and, in any case, my argument does not depend on whether the “blame” rests on DERA for the reification of the deserving/undeserving poor binary: what is important is that *this* was the language that was successful in changing public opinion and was repeated in newspapers and civic discourse. This issue is critical because this discourse is what comes under threat when the figure of the now-respectable retired resource worker is no longer dominant in the neighbourhood.

³⁰ Sommers, “Men at the Margin,” 302; see also: Iris Marion-Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), chapter 8.

hail everyone: “it was a representation of only *some* bodies” and served to suppress “the identities of the many others who used that space.”³¹

This distinction might be no more than academic if it actually were the case that the neighbourhood was entirely composed of the type of men hailed by this discourse.³² This was never the case, of course, and more significantly, from the late 1980s onwards, the picture in the Downtown Eastside has changed even more. The numbers of retired resource workers in the neighbourhood has gradually declined due to aging and the legacy of the Expo evictions.³³ As these men have passed on, they have not been replaced by another generation of resource workers, because those jobs have, by and large, left the city or disappeared altogether. Indeed, since the late 1980s a new, younger cohort has come to dominate the neighbourhood’s SRO hotels: heroin and cocaine users, women involved in the sex trade, First Nations people, the mentally ill: in short, people *even more marginalized* than the generation that preceded them and people who are exemplary of those *not* hailed by the discourse of the noble poor.³⁴ According to Jeff Sommers, this transition has meant that the “iconic representation of the aging resource-industry worker has been increasingly hard to reconcile with reality.”³⁵

This “younger, meaner, rougher crowd,”³⁶ as the city’s planning department put it, grew substantially over the 1990s and 2000s, changing the character of the neighbourhood from one recognized by the generation of loggers as a community, to a neighbourhood that began to look more and more like a “U.S.-style inner city ghetto.”³⁷ Storefront vacancies along Hastings increased dramatically, leaving the neighbourhood looking derelict and abandoned.³⁸ The 1990s saw an explosion in HIV transmission among the IV drug-using population that was the highest in the developed world,

³¹ Sommers, “Men at the Margin,” 305.

³² By the end of the 1980s, DERA’s membership also included a significant minority of Chinese-Canadian women. While this speaks well to the diversity of residents the group was able to attract, it should still be clear that other groups were excluded.

³³ There is still a high percentage of seniors (+sixty-five) in the Downtown Eastside (twenty-two percent compared to thirteen percent in the city overall in 2005–06 (City of Vancouver *2005/06 Downtown Eastside Community Monitoring Report*. Vancouver: Central Area Planning Department. 2006), so demographics fail to capture this transition. It can be inferred, however, from two factors: the disappearance of resource sector jobs from the neighbourhood and from the ages of this generation: if DERA claimed in 1987 that the average Downtown Eastsider was a former resource worker aged fifty-five, those men would be nearing eighty years old in 2011 in a neighbourhood where men’s life expectancy is sixty-six.

³⁴ Smith, “Planning, Policy, and Polarisation,” 499; Sommers, “Men at the Margin,” 305.

³⁵ Sommers, “Men at the Margin,” 305.

³⁶ City of Vancouver, *Downtown Eastside: Building a Common Future, Report #1 for Council Consideration* (Vancouver: Planning Department of Vancouver, 1998) 2.

³⁷ G. Middleton, “Skid Row Shooter Sought” the *Province* (September 18, 1996, A11), cited in Sommers, 305.

³⁸ Between 1986 and 2001 storefront vacancies increased from thirteen to forty-three percent. CCAP “Thirty Years of Retail Activity on Hastings Street”, cited in Smith, “Planning, Policy and Polarisation ...” 500.

prompting the Vancouver-Richmond Health Board to declare the city's first "public health emergency"³⁹ in 1997. Deaths attributed to illegal drugs nearly doubled over the 1990s and overdose deaths reached 300 annually.⁴⁰ Homelessness increased as Vancouver's real estate market became the most expensive in the country, giving an even more visible character to poverty in the neighbourhood: drugs or alcohol once consumed in hotel rooms were now increasingly consumed on the street, in full view of drivers passing through the neighbourhood.

These transitions are the result of processes I have identified above: the growth of the drug trade, deinstitutionalization and erosion of support for mental patients, the widespread loss of affordable housing in other parts of the city, as well as macro-economic factors such as the neoliberal retrenchment of the welfare state. Taken together, they amount to what I call a process of *lumpenization* in the Downtown Eastside: a deepening of poverty and breakdown of the earlier community.

Marx and Engels use the term *lumpenproletariat* to refer to the social class below the traditional proletariat. They refer to this unemployed, propertyless group as "vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged convicts ... swindlers, charlatans, pickpockets ... rag-pickers, beggars."⁴¹ In the contemporary Downtown Eastside, I use the term *lumpen* to refer to those radically excluded from traditional working-class citizenship: drug users, panhandlers, prostitutes, and petty drug dealers; in short, the same groups stigmatized with the designation of the "undeserving poor." It is the growth of this population since the 1980s and their concentration in the Downtown Eastside that has produced the transition I refer to here as *lumpenization*.

Progressive scholarship and political activism have had a long and troubled relationship to the *lumpen* that extends as far back as Marx and Engels' first formulation of the category. In the *Manifesto*, they refer to the *lumpen* as, "the 'dangerous class,' the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society. [The lumpen] may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its condition of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue."⁴² The *lumpen*, according to Marx and Engels, live a "degrading,

³⁹ Larry Campbell, Neil Boyd, and Lori Culbert, *A Thousand Dreams: Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and the Fight for its Future* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2009), 111.

⁴⁰ Millar, John S., *HIV, Hepatitis, and Injection Drug Use: Pay Now or Pay Later?* (Victoria, BC: Office Of the Provincial Health Officer, BC Ministry of Health), 1998, i.

⁴¹ Karl Marx transl., D.D.R., *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: Mondial, 2005), 46.

⁴² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, transl., Samuel Moore, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Books, 1967)92.

destructive mode of life,”⁴³ they lack any sense of class consciousness and exist parasitically, preying on the working class or acting as pawns of the bourgeois in putting down proletarian revolution. While rarely expressed with the vehemence we encounter here, this hostile attitude toward the *lumpen* parallels some of the exclusions one occasionally encounters in contemporary progressive movements. And while DERA was not concerned that the *lumpen* of the Downtown Eastside would sabotage their efforts by assisting Vancouver’s elites, they were nevertheless portrayed as “outsiders,” preying on the noble working class whose image DERA had worked to rehabilitate.⁴⁴

The idea of the *lumpen* as a group lacking class consciousness also has parallels in the Downtown Eastside. While DERA was able to consolidate a class identity for its members drawing on a shared history and genuine attachment to the community, this was not necessarily the case for *lumpen* groups. Indeed, I would argue that many of the *lumpen* of the Downtown Eastside do not have a strong sense of class consciousness and often have little or no love for the neighbourhood in which they live.⁴⁵ In my own research with drug-using panhandlers, anti-neighbourhood sentiments appear near universal, as are expressions of dislike and distrust for other panhandlers. I cannot recall a single expression of solidarity with other panhandlers from the people I have spoken with, and I vividly recall the day a panhandler told me that the best thing that could happen to the neighbourhood (where he had lived for over a decade) would be if it all “burned to the ground.” Panhandling drug users who are either homeless or inadequately housed represent a segment of the Downtown Eastside so marginalized that the neighbourhood appears to offer no sense of meaningful emotional attachment; for them, it is simply a place of pain and humiliation.

It is important not to draw too much from emotionally-charged statements like these. At the risk of levelling charges of “false consciousness” against these panhandlers, there is certainly much about the neighbourhood that they would miss if it were gone. The Carnegie Community Action Project’s (CCAP) recent *Community Vision for Change* featured a questionnaire conducted with 655 low-income residents and claimed that ninety-five percent of respondents would prefer to remain in the

⁴³ Robert Bussard, “The ‘Dangerous Class’ of Marx and Engels: The Rise of the Idea of the *Lumpenproletariat*,” *History of European Ideas* 8, no. 6 (1987), 683.

⁴⁴ Sommers, . “Men at the Margin,” 302-303. For more on Marx and Engel’s discussion of the *lumpen* see Hal Draper, “The Concept of the ‘Lumpenproletariat’ in Marx and Engels,” *Economies et Sociétés* 6 no. 12 (1972), 2285–2312; and Peter Hayes, “Utopia and the Lumpenproletariat: Marx’s Reasoning in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,” *The Review of Politics* 50 no. 3 (1988), 445–465 .

⁴⁵ There are, nevertheless, groups doing remarkable work trying to produce just such a sense of class (or group) consciousness. First amongst these is the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) who have created a very powerful sense of shared identity for their 1,500-plus members and who mobilize this identity to fight for their interests as drug users.

neighbourhood—if they had safe and secure housing.⁴⁶ At the same time, a 2008 demographic survey of the neighbourhood found that only sixteen percent of the SRO residents they interviewed wanted to remain in the Downtown Eastside.⁴⁷ Martha Lewis, the study’s lead author, warned against drawing overly hasty conclusions from this statistic because it did not account for people’s desire to remain in the neighbourhood if their most pressing complaints were addressed.⁴⁸ These caveats are important in as politically charged a climate as this one, where suggestions that residents do not like their neighbourhood can be used by property-developers and politicians as justification for gentrification.⁴⁹

The CCAP’s *Community Vision* is explicit that the Downtown Eastside possesses qualities that residents desire. Foremost among these is the sense of acceptance and “sanctuary” people feel in the community.⁵⁰ Indeed, the Downtown Eastside is a place where many marginalized people are accepted, are not stigmatized for their addictions, and are perhaps also spared the prejudice they encounter in the rest of the city. Nevertheless, these benefits are apparently not experienced by all, as the example from the panhandlers and drug users I refer to above suggests. If part of achieving political change depends on the successful creation of a class or group identity—that is, of individuals recognizing that their personal problems are shared by others and can be solved through common struggle—then the continued feeling of exclusion expressed by these *lumpen* subjects suggests that they have not felt themselves hailed by contemporary progressive discourse.

In light of the demographic transition in the Downtown Eastside from the retired resource worker to the more marginalized *lumpen* population of today, it is telling that DERA is no longer the hegemonic political voice in the neighbourhood. Arguably, since the late 1990s, it has been the Portland Hotel Society (PHS) that has advanced the dominant articulation of the neighbourhood, its problems, and the appropriate solutions.

⁴⁶ Wendy Pedersen and Jean Swanson, *Assets to Action: Community Vision for Change in the Downtown Eastside* (Vancouver: Carnegie Community Action Project, 2010), 6.

⁴⁷ Martha Lewis, et al, *Downtown Eastside Demographic Study of SRO and Social Housing Tenants*, (Vancouver: City of Vancouver. 2008), 23.

⁴⁸ In a separate question, nearly half (forty-eight percent) rated their satisfaction with the neighbourhood as “poor” or “very poor” as reported in Lewis, *Downtown Eastside Demographic Study*, 33.

⁴⁹ This concern was precisely what prompted the study’s authors to include the caveats mentioned above. See Martha Lewis’s comments in Condon, Sean, “Sobering Statistics: Downtown Eastside Survey Paints Grim Picture,” the *Dominion* (August 25, 2008), <http://www.dominionpaper.ca/articles/1996>.

⁵⁰ Pedersen and Swanson, *Assets to Action*, 10.

The PHS was initially a product of DERA, who purchased the Pennsylvania Hotel at Hastings and Carrall, intending to renovate it in order to provide housing for people with concurrent disorders.⁵¹ The PHS took over control of the building in 1993 and today operates thirteen residences for the hard-to-house, along with the Insite supervised injection site, Washington needle depot, and even a bank for residents who cannot access conventional financial services.⁵² The scope of the PHS's activities in the neighbourhood cannot be overemphasized; over the past fifteen years, they have become by far the most dominant group in the Downtown Eastside, commanding significant amounts of government funding for the neighbourhood and becoming BC Housing's de facto provider of services for the hard-to-house.

There is much to be inspired by in the PHS's ethics. Staff members treat residents with respect and generosity, and they do not pass judgment on the lives they live, even when they involve sex work, active drug addictions, crime to feed addictions, and disruptive behaviours related to past trauma. Whether in the hotels or at the supervised injection site, they endeavour to support and house an extremely challenging—indeed, *lumpen*—population and have been incredibly successful in doing so.⁵³

There is a great deal that is different about the PHS from their forebears in DERA. If there is a righteous anger at the centre of any political group, in the PHS, it concerns the violence of the bourgeois dichotomy between the deserving and undeserving poor, between working class and *lumpen*:

I think in the past, the Downtown Eastside got a lot from this notion of the bearded white loggers that built the wealth of the province. But I don't know if that was true or false ... but, the older activists were very successful in pushing that kind of version of what was going on down here. And, because of that, lots of housing got built. But, nowadays, the cracks in that image start to get revealed. That it's more complicated. There are mainly people down here who wider society sees as

⁵¹ A concurrent disorder describes a situation where a person experiences both a mental health issue, such as schizophrenia or clinical depression, as well as a substance abuse problem.

⁵² Portland Hotel Society, *PHS Overview*. Fact-sheet published by the Portland Hotel Society, n.d. The PHS also runs an art gallery, "life skills" centre, café, and free medical/dental clinic.

⁵³ Residents of the PHS are the epitome of the sort of *lumpen* subjects I am describing.

Penny Gurstein and Dan Small provide this statistical picture of the residents: "Most have limited education, and have not completed high school. Thirty-five per cent have had some form of childhood trauma, most often physical and/or sexual abuse. Thirty-four per cent have a diagnosed mental illness. Thirty-three per cent are HIV positive or have AIDS that they most likely got from injection drug use. Twenty-five per cent have Hepatitis C. Eighty-eight per cent have a drug or alcohol addiction and seventy-three percent are injection drug users. Ninety per cent have been involved in the criminal justice system. All are well below the poverty level." Penny Gurstein and Dan Small, "From Housing to Home: Reflexive Management for those Deemed Hard to House," *Housing Studies* 20 no. 5 (2003), 725.

undeserving. That we don't have to worry about, and we don't have to provide a house and a roof and a bit of food. That really they should be punished for the sort of people they are.⁵⁴

The PHS positions itself as a progressive group carrying on the legacy of defending the rights of Downtown Eastsiders but frames their work *against* the representational strategies employed by the generation before. Whereas DERA challenged the 1950s discourse of skid row with one of working-class community, the PHS points to the exclusions which were produced in the process of reifying the figure of the “bearded white logger.”

In light of the changing demographics of the Downtown Eastside, as well as the fundamental political necessity of including the *lumpen* in any legitimate political project, the critique represented by the PHS is an essential component to the political discourse of the Downtown Eastside. This does not mean that the PHS as a whole is an answer to the neighbourhood's need for an organization that can represent it and deliver change. Indeed, unlike DERA, the PHS is not a democratically run organization, and thus is not accountable to its residents in the way DERA was accountable to its members. And while much of what the PHS does is politically very progressive, it is not an organization dedicated to building political solidarity and class identity in the way that DERA was. If DERA presented an image of the retired resource worker as a counterpoint to the skid row derelict, who does the PHS offer as a political figure? So far, that figure has been the “hard-to-house” and the resident with “concurrent disorders.” This has meant that the discourse offered by the PHS in replacing DERA's “working class community” is one of “human rights” and perhaps “best practices” in the management of difficult populations—an important *humanitarian* discourse perhaps, but not the sort of radical *political* discourse the neighbourhood requires. This work of building a class identity has fallen to other groups in recent years: the Carnegie Community Action Project (CCAP), Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood Council (DNC), and Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) most notably. We can see in these groups the continuation of a legacy of democratic, citizen-led organizing for which the Downtown Eastside is justly famed. More importantly perhaps, while these groups share much with the rhetoric of community solidarity advanced by DERA, the conception of community they advance is not one predicated on the exclusion of a *lumpen* other. Indeed, the interests of drug users, panhandlers, and binners feature prominently in the CCAP's recent *Community Vision for Change* through recommendations for a regulated legal drug market, as well as rights for those who make their living through binning at the weekly Street Markets organized by the DNC. The work done by these groups is vital if the

⁵⁴ Co-executive director of the PHS (not named), quoted in Gurstein and Small, “From Housing to Home,” 723.

Downtown Eastside is to remain a politically active community and create a new political subject that includes the *lumpen* who were previously excluded. As important as the work done by the PHS has been to sustaining the lives of this group, it does not appear that they will be the ones producing such a political subject. Nevertheless, they continue to be the organization advancing the dominant narrative of the neighbourhood, as well as the group through which substantial state monies enter the neighbourhood for housing and health care. It remains to be seen whether other, more political—and at the same time, more inclusive—narratives can rise to prominence, allowing the Downtown Eastside to speak in a voice more fully its own.