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HIPSTERS AND THE CITY

Abstract

The focus of the following article is the topography of Toronto's most hip public places. Then, the attention will shift to the closed spaces of hipster apartments and workplaces. Having described where and how hipsters live, The article discusses the ways in which hipsters explore and experience urban spaces. As contemporary counterparts of nineteenth- century Parisian *flâneurs*, neo-bohemians wander the streets in order to draw artistic inspiration from them. Therefore, Toronto is described here as an incentive to create art. Subsequently, the paper will reflect on the gentrification process in Toronto as it is interpreted in three novels: *What We All Long for* by Dionne Brand, Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?*, and *Holding Still For As Long As Possible* by Zoe Whittall. According to the three writers, hip artists not only beautify their surroundings, but also make them more livable.

Résumé

L'objectif de l'article suivant est la topographie de la plupart des lieux publics branchés de Toronto. Ensuite, l'attention se déplacera vers les espaces fermés des appartements et des lieux de travail des hipster. Après avoir décrit où et comment les hipsters vivent, l'article examinera les façons dont les hipsters explorent et découvrent les espaces urbains. En tant qu'équivalents contemporains des flâneurs parisiens du XIX^e siècle, les néo-bohémiens errent dans les rues afin d'en tirer de l'inspiration artistique. Par conséquent, Toronto y est décrite comme une stimulation à créer de l'art. Par la suite, l'article se penchera sur le processus d'embourgeoisement à Toronto tel qu'il est présenté dans les trois romans: *What We All Long for* de Dionne Brand, *How Should a Person Be ?* de Sheila Heti et *Holding Still For As Long As Possible* de Zoe Whittall. Selon les trois auteurs, les artistes branchés ont non seulement embelli leur environnement, mais aussi ils l'ont rendu plus habitable.

Canada is no longer a nation of trappers, lumberjacks, farmers, and assorted benevolent small-town caricatures. We are accountants, computer programmers, retail clerks, dentists, poets, punk activists, plumbers, slackers, bus drivers, and students. We are every possible profession, race, creed, and religion. The sole thing that binds us together is that we live in Canadian cities. In fact, almost 80% of all Canadians today live in urban communities. Yet, many of us do not fully grasp the full implications of this new environment. We cling, as we did in 1957, to the notion of Canada replete with clear streams dammed by pesky but adorable beavers, watched over by caribou and grizzlies being stalked by the burly, plaid-shirted outdoorsy types the media would like us to think are the real Canadians (Niedzviecki and Wershler-Henry viii).

The statement above, to be found in *The Original Canadian City Dweller's Almanac*, alerts the reader to how the perception of Canada as a vast territory of untamed nature started to change a few decades ago. Rapid large-scale urbanization has led to many changes in the society that have been pointed out by critics of culture, artists and writers. When talking about (the field of) literature, it is worth recalling the words of Justin Edwards and Douglas Ivison who have argued "the centrality of the city in [contemporary] Canadian literature" (1). According to them, the attention of contemporary Canadian writers has gradually moved away from rural to urban environments, and their books no longer evolve around the themes of the North, small towns, and "roughing it in the bush." Therefore, the need arises to start the academic and critical discussion about the stories set in the Canada of today, which is the Canada synonymous with the urban setting; it is high time to start listening to the voices of contemporary urban literary characters; explore the problems that engage their attention and that make their lives go round.

Having established that the city is the locale of much contemporary writings, one needs to reflect on the characters and issues addressed in the novels that fall into the category of new urban literature. Niedzviecki and Wershler-Henry reflect on both of these in their alternative guide for Canadian city dwellers:

Urban writers speak less of professional travails and existential showdowns with an indifferent landscape and more of the lives lived in the shared metropolis, in the shadow of a promise that cannot be kept. New urban Canadian writing provides some insight into the way generations of perpetual undergraduates (the "avant-grad," if you will) and professional waiters envision their country and their lives. (...) Like the urban spaces it represents, new Canadian urban writing is an ugly glorious sprawl, as compelling as it is horrifying. (159)

According to the critics, it is not only the locales that have changed in modern Canadian novels, but also the protagonists and their problems. These are of the

kind not to be encountered in the older Canadian fiction. What the recent novels explore is the whole generation of young people, some of whom – judging by the description – are hipsters. Thus, Niedzwiecki's and Wershler-Henry's statement can become a starting point for studying hipster fiction. Due to the fact that hipsters are by definition city dwellers, there is no such a thing as hipster rural fiction. Contemporary Canadian neo-bohemian protagonists make themselves at home in big city low-rent neighborhoods and move around downtowns.

Nevertheless, not every Canadian city is hip. It can be argued that three of the biggest cities – Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto – are the hub of neo-bohemianism. Examples of hipster novels set in the first two include *Beauty Plus Pity* by Kevin Chong and *Bottle Rocket Hearts* by Zoe Whittall. However, the great majority of hip urban novels are located in Toronto, the largest metropolis in Canada. Writers as different as Russell Smith, the author of *Noise*, Daniel Jones, who wrote a series of short stories *People One Knows: Toronto Stories*, or Carol Shields in her *Unless* portray hipster protagonists, silhouetting them against the landscape of Toronto. One may wonder what makes that city such a fertile ground for hipster fiction. According to Lisa Salem-Wiseman, the association may be linked to “the constant effort on the part of Toronto's media and entertainment industry to prove the city as ‘hip’ as New York or Miami.” (Edwards and Ivison 151) This means that the media hype has elevated Toronto to the status to a hipster Mecca on the banks of Lake Ontario. Keenan provides some further explanation: “three elements of Toronto's current cultural/political landscape share some broad traits: a passion for quirkiness, for a start, and small-is-beautiful, DIY aesthetics... They also share an aversion to commercialism that borders on the fanatical.” (Wilcox and McBride 32) The two areas of activism – cultural and political – have been combined in the program called Creative City. The municipal authorities have promoted art in the city and the activity of neo-liberal artists and writers, such as Sheila Heti and Misha Glouberman. A mix of these features makes Toronto an attractive location for writers to set their bohemian characters in.

Thus, it is no coincidence that the hipster novels that are the focus of the present paper – *What We All Long For*, *How Should a Person Be* and *Holding Still For As Long As Possible* – are all set in Toronto. However, the city is not described in the three novels from the same perspective. It is represented in them in three distinct ways. Dionne Brand, who represents an older generation of Canadian writers, provides a broad outlook on Toronto, and elevates it to the role of the novel's protagonist. In her *What We All Long For* Toronto becomes a life-giver for a group of young hipsters. Their biographies are contrasted with the biographies of their non-hipster parents, which allow the writer to say something of how the urban Toronto transformed between 1960 and 2000. By contrast, Zoe Whittall and Sheila Heti, who are hipsters themselves, provide the reader with an insider's view of the urban space. In Heti's *How Should a Person Be* the city is

introduced as a series of vignettes. The first-person narration of the protagonist, named after the author of the novel, is a series of contemplations, on how particular places in the city are perceived by a bohemian. In *Holding Still For As Long As Possible*, Whittall sets the events in the most hip spots and neighborhoods of Toronto, such as Parkdale, and locates the plot sometime around the SARS epidemic between 2005 and 2006. Thus, the novel becomes a chronicle of that particular period in the city's history as well as a guide book to the areas where hip Torontonians go.

Sally McKay claims that "Torontonians live in microcosms. Physical neighbourhoods and social networks overlap and intertwine." (Wilcox and McBride 118) McKay's observation is also true about Toronto art community. Artists tend to appear in some areas in large numbers and with greater frequency than in others, creating a network of paths and spots in the city that are felt to be "artistic". In the article published in the summer of 2013 titled "Toronto Hipster Map A Godsend For Everyone Else" *Huffington Post Canada* reported about a map of Toronto published by Yelp website which may be of help to the aficionados of hipsterdom. The map identifies Ossington Avenue as the heart of the city's bohemia. The core of the original art neighborhood stretches also along, Queen Street West and from Spadina to Bathurst. The author of the article notices that several minor hipster encampments have emerged also on Bloor Street that until recently used to be thought of as a yuppiefied area.

The places described as hipster Meccas in the novels by Brand, Heti, and Whittall can be easily identified on the map of real hip Toronto. These places include the afore-mentioned Queen West Street, Ossington, Dundas, Kensington Market and Parkdale where the fictional characters live, work, wander, and go to clubs, restaurants or cafes.

Kensington Market should open the list of hipster places. Everyone who has ever been to Toronto probably visited this pedestrian area which has been transformed beyond recognition by artists. In the vicinity of Kensington Market, buildings are all covered with graffiti and bright paints. In the gardens there are sculptures made of recycled materials, and the streets are swarming with hipsters cycling or wandering in search of vintage clothes shops or cozy cafés. In *Chairs Are Where The People Go*, a book co-authored by Sheila Heti, Misha Glouberman devotes the whole chapter to this place. He writes:

Traditionally the neighborhood has been an immigrant neighborhood (...), and also for a long time it's been a place where a certain number of artists and young people and writers and musicians have lived. It's really a distinct place in Toronto: little streets and shops – butchers, fruit stands, and that kind of thing. It's one of the few neighborhoods in Toronto that is not just a long street. Kensington Market is actually a little winding grid of tiny one-way streets (103).

In another article, titled “No Place Like Kensington,” Glouberman comes to a conclusion that Kensington Market is renowned all over the world and is mentioned whenever people write about remarkable city spaces (Wilcox and McBride 126). The place was an inspiration for Zoe Whittall, who placed there the key event of *Holding Still For As Long As Possible* around which she constructed the plot of the novel. That event is a bike accident involving Amy and Billy, which becomes a life-changing moment in the lives of the characters. The author’s choice of Kensington Market may be interpreted as marking the end of Billy’s hipster lifestyle; after the accident she settles down, recovers from an anxiety disorder and strengthens her relationship with Josh. In the novel by Dionne Brand, Kensington Market plays an equally important role, but it affects the life of a character in a completely different manner. It becomes a refuge for Oku who, instead of going to his classes, sits in a coffee shop and reads Amiri Baraka or Jayne Cortez, or just observes people in the street (168). The young man leaves the path outlined for him by his parents by leaving the university and begins a bohemian life of a poet and freethinker, surrounded by the circle of his hipster friends.

Another important landmark on Toronto’s hipster map is Queen West, which may compared to the world famous New York’s Bedford Avenue in Williamsburg. Although it is still regarded as a hub for artists, the area has become so popular that it is slowly becoming mainstream. Sally McKay describes this phenomenon in her essay “Fly on Queen Street”:

When I moved to town [Toronto] in 1990, my roots sought nourishment in the niche of Queen Street West. I remember meeting an older friend at Future Bakery. He’d lived on Queen throughout the eighties, when the zone was characterized by drugs and bands and seedy, fascinating glam. “Oh, this street is all yuppiefied now,” he said. “It’s sooo depressing.” To me, it was vibrant and exciting, full of artistic people leading alternative lifestyles. I was discovering a big world full of quirky endeavours (Wilcox and McBride 118).

Such divergent opinions are echoed in the descriptions of the area to be found in Heti’s and Whittall’s novels. In *How Should a Person Be?* the artsy character of Queen West is emphasized. Sheila and Margaux chose it as a location for their shared studio. The flat becomes for them a hub of creative work where one writes her dramas and the other paints. The neighborhood grants them the status of bohemians. By way of contrast, *Holding Still For As Long As Possible* presents the street as a mainstream area where Amy, a stylish city girl, goes after hours:

At four we went from the office to Java House, a cheap coffee, beer, and spring-rolls joint. The place was crammed with back-to-school drinkers and the waiters seemed inconvenienced and our voices crept louder and louder up the walls with

the cockroaches, curling around the amateurish Goth art. By the time most people were finishing dinner out on the patios along Queen Street, we were shit-faced (Whittall 42).

Only the gritty character of the bar suggests the original artistic atmosphere of the street, while all of the other places are crowded with ordinary Torontonians.

The majority of hip spots in Toronto are described as typically hip, that is not different from any hipster neighborhood all over the world. Most of them are centres of various leisure activities, illustrating the statement by Lloyd about the postindustrial city as “an entertainment machine” which generates a range of cultural amenities (122). Brand, Heti, and Whittall depict in their novels clubs, bars and restaurants as the hubs of hipster life. *What We All Long For* evokes the two most recognizable clubs. The first was called Paramount and remained extremely popular until its closing. Brand writes:

They knew about the Paramount from Cape Breton to Vancouver, *they* being a select group. Black people and a few, very few, hip whites – whites who were connected (...), the Paramount was a place of grace – like church. Where else could you enjoy the only thing you were sure God gave you, your body, without getting into any kind of trouble for it? Well, trouble you could handle anyway – trouble you didn't give a shit about, trouble you were looking for. You could dance that thing around the Paramount like there was no tomorrow. (96)

The second in terms of popularity was Duke, as grim a place as Paramount. Here is how Brand describes it:

The Duke was always lurking in the mirror – the bald-faced bad luck of it, the straight-up knowing of it. There was the Duke, waiting to swallow you. There was the Duke, ready to swaddle you in its seedy arms; there was the worn-out shuffleboard table, the deep bar chairs, the smell of spunky beer on tap. (...) The Duke stripped you naked in an ugly kind of way. Every person in there looked like they were ashamed to be there, like they had lost respect for themselves and therefore each other. If you strutted into the Paramount, you slid into the Duke. (181)

Both clubs are depicted by Brand as places where people transform into bohemians lost for lust, drugs, alcohol, sex and music. Once there, people enter a trance and act on their primal instincts. Jackie's parents who may be regarded as “pre-hipsters” used to attend these spots a lot neglecting their daughter who later on became a hipster herself. Unlike Brand, Sheila Heti portrays the already updated place where hipsters go for a drink. No longer is it treated as a sanctuary of hipsterdom, but rather a place for socializing, discussing existential problems and, in the fictional Sheila's case of looking

for an answer to the question “how should a person be.” She visits a place called Communist Daughter which is not, as the name suggests, devoid of hipster ironic attitude to reality. She goes there to talk to her friend Ryan about “how important he thought it was for the earth to spin on its axis.” (Heti 143) Heti goes on describing also other places where hipsters go during the daytime. The narrator reports to the readers the scene of a regular Sunday lunch with her friends Misha, Margaux, Sholem and his boyfriend Jon:

A few weeks earlier, the owners had repainted the diner walls from a grease-splattered beige to a thick pastel blue and had spray-painted giant pictures of scrambled eggs and strips of bacon and pancakes with syrup. It ruined the place somewhat, but the food was cheap, it was never crowded, and they always had a place for us. (Heti 11)

The uglier and cheaper the place, the more attractive it is for the hipster. The main character concludes that she liked the place much more when it had dirty walls; after the renovation it has lost much of its old glamour.

All in all, should someone draw a map of the hip public places mentioned in the three novels, they would be consistent with the map of Toronto’s most hipster spots published by Yelp. The reason why they are referred to as a hipster Mecca is that masses of bohemian Torontonians visit these urban areas as if they were the places of religious cult. Hipsters come there to affirm their hipster identity, but also because these places cater for their lifestyle. The areas mentioned by Brand, Heti, and Whittall are very important spaces that shape the identity of the characters. Were they real people, one could associate them with this particular subculture only by encountering them in Kensington Market, Queen West or a club similar to the Paramount.

Closed Spaces: Basement or Squat as the Microcosm of Hipster Existence

Having discussed hipster public places, it is now necessary to take a closer look at their private quarters. One should start by acknowledging the truth that the places where people spend most of their time influence them. But the influence goes both ways – spaces are also affected by the persons who inhabit them. This relationship makes the focus of the following discussion.

The authors of the three novels present the way in which the apartment creates the character of a hipster. Not only does such a place give him or her the freedom to be independent and follow a bohemian lifestyle, it also becomes his or her refuge from the family or the past. The protagonists of *What We All Long For* and *How Should a Person Be* may serve as the examples of how moving out from

family home and living on one's own becomes the first step on the way to adopting hipster identity. Tuyen's parents emigrated to Canada from Vietnam, looking for a better, more prosperous environment for their children. Despite their university education, as emigrants with a low status in Canadian society, they end up working in a Vietnamese restaurant. Thanks to money-grubbing and hard work, they managed to buy a house in a rich area of Cabbage Town and send their children to universities. However, the parents' expectations that their children will become wealthy, educated, and successful and thus will improve their position in society did not match the hopes of their daughter. Tuyen rejects her parents' *nouveau riche*, consumerist lifestyle and, without the approval of her mother and father, moves to a filthy apartment to start her career as an artist. This is how Brand describes the reaction of Tuyen's family:

Cam would have liked to visit her daughter, but Tuyen's father had forbidden it, thinking that they had to maintain a solid front in their objections to Tuyen moving out. The front always wavered though, as their anxiety made them send Binh to give Tuyen money. Binh refused to go up to the studio apartment because he said the staircase was filthy, so he would always lean on his car horn or scream her name up the alleyway until she came down. She was younger than Binh by eighteen months, but she felt she was much more mature, since he seemed to need their parents' approval far more than she. (14)

In her run-down apartment Tuyen works on her Lubaio installation, and as she has almost no money for a living, eats next to nothing. Nevertheless, she is proud of her life-changing decision as separation from her family allows her to become a real artist.

Tuyen's influence on the space she inhabits is equally significant. In the following passage Brand writes of the way Tuyen has altered her apartment:

(...) [S]he had surreptitiously broken down the wall between her bedroom and the kitchen, making one large room for her installations. One thing with Mrs. Chou's slum apartments – the ceilings were high. Tuyen's dark room was a thick black velvet curtain. The dishes were in the bathtub as the countless paintbrushes were in the sink. Chinese architecture, she said, dating way back, did not use walls for support. Columns were used, she said. She avoided the visits of Mrs. Chou, installed new locks, and made Carla [her friend] her lookout for Mrs. Chou's possible raids. She had virtually destroyed the apartment. If she ever moved, she would have to do it late at night and very quickly and without a trace. (25)

The way she shapes her living space could be regarded as destruction of somebody's property. However, from the point of view of an artist, the space becomes a piece of art and so Tuyen's remodeled apartment becomes the object of jealousy of her hipster friends.

In *How Should a Person Be* Heti describes another case of place's influence on a hipster's identity. Sheila leaves her husband and her conventional life because she does not fit in the traditional social role of a wife. In her former house, she felt stifled as a writer and she felt her development was arrested. She observes: "Living in that house with my husband, I could not escape my every mistake; the walls were permanently scuffed with all the dark marks I had made while foolishly living. All I saw were the smudges, prominently there on what otherwise would have been a pure white wall." (Heti 43) It is only when Sheila moves out, that she starts living independently, free of the feeling of guilt that she is losing herself in a life she does not want to have. She concludes, "I was living in a crummy basement apartment, having just left my marriage and the suffocating feeling of leading a life that was not my own. I couldn't understand how it had come to that." (Heti 39) Her new small apartment is a small basement secures her the freedom to become a bohemian. Having moved in, Sheila starts seeing people who are like her. She has an affair with Israel, whose house is another typical hipster spot. Once after their date, Sheila visits Israel's place:

We went up the dark stairwell to the top of a run-down boarding-house. He had two rooms at the top of the stairs: one for his drawing and painting, the other where he slept. He had no possessions other than a table, a mattress on the floor, a few dishes in the sink, and a hot plate plugged into the wall. I felt like I could just close my eyes and go to sleep on that mattress forever. There were no chairs, so I sat down on the messy sheets and watched him move around the room, then leave for the bathroom, then come back, showered and changed, coked up, his shirt open and untucked. (Heti 78)

Heti emphasizes here that artists need little to live on and that they focus on collecting experiences rather than objects. Despite the fact that Israel's apartment is under-furnished, Sheila feels comfortable there, amazed by the artsy character of the place which is also a part of the allure of her hipster boyfriend. Thus, the space he inhabits, although in fact almost empty, becomes a source of inspiration for his art and influences not only his own life, but also the relationship he has with Sheila.

To sum up, the private spaces which the hipsters inhabit shape their identity as bohemians. They, on the one hand, separate the characters from the ordinary life and from their families, but on the other tighten their bonds with the hipster community. They also become the hipsterly hermitages, spaces of inspiration and self-discovery.

Gentrification: Hipster as a Pioneer

Hipsters not only transform the places they inhabit, they also usurp the right to reshape the shared public spaces. Hipsters' impact can be seen in many contemporary cities, and it is known as the first step towards gentrification. The process starts when bohemians move into a low-rental area, usually one inhabited by immigrants and working class people. Once they have settled down, the artists start to beautify (in their understanding of the term) the neighborhood. The next step comes when the transformed neighborhood with its artsy glamour begins to attract developers who buy out the buildings and raise rents in order to get rid of the hipsters and to attract professionals and the middle class professionals called yuppies. Yuppification is the last stage in the transformation of such an urban space, and it is usually marked with the opening of a Starbucks café at the corner or an expensive second-hand boutique. This process and the hipsters' involvement in gentrification are described in all three novels by Brand, Heti, and Whittall.

In *What We All Long For* Brand writes extensively of the impact her hipster characters have on the city spaces they inhabit. The first stage, when the hipsters move in to a poor neighborhood, starts with Tuyen and Carla renting a tenement apartment. There are more people like them in the neighborhood who slowly start transforming the place. Among them there is a group of graffiti artists who show their personal perception of the city in their artwork. In one of the scenes, Kumaran, Keeran, Abel, and Jericho paint a jungle outside the building they inhabit.

[T]he walls of the two buildings caverning the alley were now covered in paintings. On one side there was a flowering jungle, lianas wrapped around the CN Tower, elephants drinking by the lake, pelicans perched on the fire escapes. On the other side there was a seaside, a woman in a bathing suit and hat shading her eyes, looking out to sea. (Brand 301)

The artists draw on the wall a comparison between Toronto and the jungle. On another occasion, they sneak into a subway tunnel and risk their lives to paint there and show their art to the daily commuters of municipal transportation network. Graffiti is a link between the artists and the city. In a commentary on the influence artists have on Toronto, Reid observes the following about the way creativity forces its way into the public sphere in the form of graffiti and murals.

Graffiti includes both the good, such as commissioned murals by established artists that liven up dull walls, and the bad, such as crude tags that deface previously attractive public spaces. The good artists, however, often learned their craft doing the

bad stuff. And attractive murals are often commissioned by property owners who want to discourage or cover up ugly tagging. Left to their own devices, the city government and property owners would probably leave walls blank, out of conservatism or inertia. Graffiti fills a vacuum, forcing dull walls to be decorated, and in this way imposing creativity. (Wilcox and McBride 55)

This creative flow cannot be channeled or controlled by legislations. Illegal murals and graffiti allow hipster artists to reach audiences larger than those attracted by the artists whose works are exhibited in Toronto's ROM or AGO. In addition to that, hipster artists become gurus and apostles of unrestricted creativity. Not only do they acquire the status of local heroes in the circle of their fellow neo-bohemians but also become the link between the artistic underground and the city residents, familiarizing the latter with the idea of art as belonging in the shared urban space.

The next step in the process of gentrification is using the hip allure to make business and attract hipster consumers to a gentrified neighborhood. One example of such a phenomenon is the store in which Jackie works and its surroundings:

Ab und Zu [name of the store] advertised itself as selling post-bourgeois clothing. The store was just on the border where Toronto's trendy met Toronto's seedy. The rent was cheap, and Jackie had had the foresight to think that the trendy section would slowly creep toward Ab und Zu and sweep the store into money. Next door to Ab und Zu was a greasy spoon – Sam's recently taken over by other hopeful trendies – a couple of women who were anarchists. There, a mix of the old neighbourhood – the working class, the poor, the desperate – and an increasing number of anarchists – mostly friends of the two women – drank coffee in mutual curiosity. Every morning, the two women and Reiner, because he opened the store, would have to wash the sidewalk of last night's vomit or piss. (Brand 99)

The gritty glamour of the hipster neighborhood is attractive to bohemians, but it also encourages the development of local business and attracts the attention of people with the higher income. Soon, the economic growth in the area and the social polarization of the neighborhood lead to the last stage of gentrification. In Dionne Brand's novel the remodeling of buildings previously utilized and adapted by hipsters is described as the disappearance of lives in the city:

How does life disappear like that? It does at all the time in a city. One moment a corner is a certain corner, gorgeous with your desires, then it disappears under the constant construction of this and that. A bank flounders into a pizza shop, then into an abandoned building with boarding and graffiti. Then after weeks of you passing it by not noticing the infinitesimal changes, it springs to life as an exclusive condo. (183)

The narrator is clearly fond of adjusting the urban space to the needs of hipsters. For instance, she accepts transforming the run-down buildings into hip cafes or clubs, provided it maintains their gritty glamour. What she objects to is their becoming ever more commercial and conventionally pretty. The process of yuppification deprives the city of its soul, leaving just the corps of the buildings without their genuine character. The above description from Dionne Brand's novel can be coupled with the scene from Whittall's novel in which a character named Billy recalls how the neighborhood of her friend's apartment was transformed from being truly pre-hip into a hipster area:

A hotel that used to provide the neighbourhood a certain visible sketch factor had been rebuilt into a boutique hotspot called the Drake Hotel, with a hipster happy hour and over-priced entrees. The first Starbucks. Residents had reacted as if someone had taken a big shit on their front porch. The graffiti condemning it was witty Roxy's friend Richard, a local multimedia artist, made pins that read *Blame the Drake*. Roxy wore one, somewhat ironically. Condos were sprouting like acne on every block. Rents were rising. Our landlord who was old, usually drunk and lived in Mississauga only remembered to cash the rent cheques half the time. We were lucky he probably wouldn't think to raise it. When Maria and I moved out of our place on Argyle, our landlord there said he was selling to a developer. (51)

The neighborhoods affected by the process of gentrification may be described as an equivalent of the urban Wild West. It becomes clear that the originally poor and then remodeled areas are not secure, in terms of permanent settlement, either for the ordinary working class dwellers or the hipsters. The artists who explore and change the urban space are also at risk of being ousted by yuppies. The Drake Hotel mentioned by Whittall was a real place in Toronto situated at the corner of Queen and Beaconsfield. The neighboring streets before they were revitalized were called "the wild wild west" by the owner of the hotel (Wilcox and McBride 158). The language of the frontier appears often in commentaries on the process of cities' redevelopment. A geographer, Neil Smith, uses the notion of Wild West to describe the gentrification process that took place in Lower East Side in Manhattan. He praises the courage of the new residents who settled the low-income and mixed-race neighborhoods. By contrast, Smith criticizes the "urban pioneers" for the fact that while "roughing it in the bush," they do not take into account the people who used to live in the area before them (Wilcox and McBride 158). That leads to the situation vividly described in *What We All Long For* by Billy, who concludes that the local residents are not only dissatisfied with the changes in the neighborhood, but also complain about the quality of life in their residential area. Such a problem has been voiced by a Torontonion, Misha Glouberman who, despite being a hipster himself, objects to gentrification. He even established a committee fighting for the rights of the

people owning apartments in the entertainment district of Toronto. Glouberman and his supporters advocate regulating the number of nightclubs because such establishments have a negative impact on the area. In one of his essays "Neighborhoods Change," he comes to the conclusion that it is important to establish the limits on the changes in the neighborhood because fundamental democratic freedoms of every resident should be respected. For instance, he compares criticism of a gay bookstore next door to objections to a certain ethnic minority inhabiting a certain area. No one has the right to raise a voice of protest as long as the majority accepts the *status quo* (Glouberman, and Heti 161).

A hipster may be thus compared to a pioneer. Settling in a neighborhood of low-rentals and high crime rate demands considerable courage and a vision that those run-down blocks can become living spaces and pieces of art. The graffiti crew from Dionne Brand's novel may serve as the best example here. However, one should bear in mind that the hipster pioneers are at the same time colonizers. They impose their presence and art on the shared public space, claiming that they are beautifying the environment in the process. Moreover, their lifestyle demands a large number of nightclubs and cafes which they use on a daily basis. Non-hipster residents who are colonized in the process suffer from side effects of the hipster takeover, namely, what they see as defaced buildings, dirty streets and noise. This conflict is vividly pictured in *What We All Long For* as Brand writes of Ab und Zu store. The paradox, of course, is that the efforts of "bohemian pioneers" to settle in the "urban wild West" and to modernize it are in the long run futile because they only prepare the area for the developers and the yuppies who will soon oust them from the neighborhood. By initiating gentrification of the neighborhoods, by ousting the locals, they start a chain reaction of urban redevelopment and become its victims too.

When Hipsters Run in a City, a City Runs in their Veins: How Hipsters Experience a City

The following discussion will focus on the ways in which the characters of *What We All Long For*, *How Should a Person Be*, and *Holding Still For As Long As Possible* experience Toronto. A lot has been said about the natural bond between hipsters and the city. New bohemians have their identity defined by urban spaces.

One of the essays in *uTopia* is devoted to the physical experience of the city as described by the term *flaneurie*, introduced by Baudelaire in reference to late nineteenth-century urbanite:

The flaneur is a detached figure; his concern is primarily for [sic!] the city as an aesthetic entity, not for those who appear within the landscape (except as intellectual, perhaps erotic, objects of his gaze). He walks to revive the hidden city; the city's bodies are folded into his apparently progressive watching (...) But as the modern flaneur walks away, what traces does he leave behind? One of the characteristics of contemporary Toronto flaneurie is its insistence that anyone can walk the city, anytime, but within this framework lies an unspoken alternative: that *not* to walk the city is to fail to appreciate the city properly, to fail to understand that remaking Toronto as an urban utopia requires a commitment from every citizen to learn to navigate the city better, more progressively. (Wilcox and McBride 47)

The argument in the excerpt is that hipsters have to learn to experience the city as a state of the mind on the move. Movement means progress in the understanding the place they inhabit. Flaneurs' responses to the urban spaces as aesthetic entities have to be generated in their bodies. This can be achieved by walking, but the experience becomes more exciting and intense when distances are covered at ever greater speed. It is no wonder then that one of the attributes of the contemporary bohemian is a bike. The streets in big cities are nowadays swarming with bearded men wearing plaid shirts and women in dresses with loose hair, all of whom pace the city streets on fixed gears that are a popular trend among hipsters and a symbol of their status. In *Chairs Are Where the People Go*, Misha Glouberman makes a point that cyclists and pedestrians are in a privileged position vis-a-vis suburbanites. This is a result of the fact that hipsters do not have to commute to their workplaces located downtown by means of cars or public transportation. A he or a she hipster has the freedom to live in an affordable apartment and do a menial job close to his or her home (Glouberman and Heti 104).

This is precisely the case of one of the characters in *What We All Long For*, Carla, who makes cycling her lifestyle. She is a courier who loves her job, mainly because it allows her to express her love for Toronto with her body:

The handlebars of the bike were like her own bones, and like her bones she bent the brace toward the park itself. Perhaps there she might burn off the pace of her legs up the inclines and through the trees. But she was out of the park before she knew it. The trees held nothing. The manicured circle of flowers, the false oasis of the park, only made her sicker. Before long she was out on Bloor Street again, speeding east toward the centre of the city, flinging herself through the lights at Keele and bending southward to the lake: the bellowing horn and pneumatic brake of an eighteen-wheeler flinched her sinuous back, but she didn't stop for the trucker yelling curses at her. She left the drama of the shocked driver and skewered traffic behind. If she could stop, she would have, but she was light and light moves. (Brand 29)

Regardless of the hazards of the street traffic, Carla wants to fully experience the city. The bike is her tool in that process and becomes an integral part of her body. The last sentence of the excerpt above is a play on words. On the one hand, the character feels “light” because of the physical sensation in her body and of the clarity of her mind. On the other hand, light as a noun stands for great speed and unstoppable energy. The flow of that energy creates a bond between the hipster and her urban environment. The same metaphor of body as light is used in Zoe Whittall’s novel when her character wanders the streets barefoot. After her first date with Josh, Billy goes back to her apartment feeling high and looking at her surroundings from a different perspective:

I glided home, stopping to take off my impossibly high heels and walk barefoot down Argyle Street. I paused outside my old apartment, the one I had shared with Maria, and noted the new curtains, the toys in the yard. I cut down to Queen Street, and smiled at the guy panhandling outside the bathtub store. I even smiled at the assholes outside the Social and the jerk faces lined up to get into the Drake – everyone got big grins from me. I stopped to pet small dogs on leashes. I felt light light light. (Whittall 121)

Billy feels high, elevated by the crush she has on Josh, but also by her love of the city. The feeling of positive reinforcement, combined with immersion in urban space, becomes like a medicine for the anxiety disorder and frequent mood swings she suffers from.

Another way of experiencing the city presented in the three novels is wandering about the city under the influence of drugs. In one of the scenes in *How Should a Person Be* a couple of hipster friends, Sheila and Margaux, decide to look for a new way of experiencing the urban environment. They take drugs to explore an alternative and a deep way of relating to the place. The following excerpt depicts the characters entering the narcotic trance and feeling the sensation of relating anew to the city space:

Though it was cold, we’d pace through the city at night. Now in one direction, now another. Always changing direction. Should we go down this alley? Fine. Do you want to go up this alley? Yes, let’s do it. But we just came down this alley. That’s okay, we’ll go up it again. We went up it and down it, up it and down. If we keep walking through this alley, we’ll tread a rut into it. That’s okay, I prefer pacing to getting somewhere. Up it and down, up and down. Then in the mornings Margaux would paint, and I would wash the walls. It was getting colder. We told ourselves that these were the happiest days of our lives. (138)

Their nighttime walks, become a ritual for Margaux and Sheila. The simple act of wandering around the streets without purpose makes that period in their lives the best time they ever had. They are artists who seek new sensations in

order to live their lives to the fullest. A similar need is expressed by the characters in *Holding Still For As Long As Possible*. In the key scene of the novel the lives of two main characters, Amy's and Billy's, are transformed by combining the two ways of experiencing the city – drug taking and bike riding. After doing drugs and drinking alcohol, the two women decide to go for a bike ride. They do it in order to experience the city. But, their experiment ends up in a tragedy. The city confronts them with its reality in the form of a truck which collides with the girls' bikes.

The three novels explore experiencing the city both physically and mentally. The gist of the first kind of experience is movement and physical effort that produce the endorphins that deepen one's love for one's place. That is why Brand's Carla loves her job while Whittall's Billy regains the joy of life by walking barefoot and smiling at people, something she rarely does because of her anxiety disorder. The alternative way to get a new perspective on familiar urban spaces is by taking drugs. Sheila, the protagonist of *How Should a Person Be*, concludes that the time when she wandered the city on drugs was the happiest time in her life. Both ways have a similar impact on the hipsters, leaving them ever more aware of and ever more pleased with the place they inhabit.

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