

Introduction

A map maker's job is to take multiple realities of the world and squeeze them into a two-dimensional drawing. To do this, the cartographer has to decide what to include and what to leave out. Some maps demonstrate the emotional relationship between landmarks by changing the geographic space between them. Others chart numbers or beliefs, even mental spaces we don't usually consider to be places. As we return to them day after day, these mental spaces can become as real as our own street. *V6A: Writing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside* is a map of ideas in creative writing by people who know the streetscape intimately.

The title V6A refers to the postal code assigned in 1972 by Canada Post as a prefix for the urban Vancouver area known as the Downtown Eastside (DTES). The code allowed for the sorting of mail as well as the collection of data about inhabitants culled from censuses, studies, and other sources,¹ that was organized to identify socioeconomic conditions. While it's true that the DTES, Vancouver's oldest community, is an area dealing with intense social issues such as unemployment, addiction, crime, violence, and the survival sex trade, these challenges are not the sum of the place. Through the years this data collection has done what it was supposed to—ignore the intangibles, those unquantifiable aspects of community that cannot be charted or graphed—it's also had the side effect of reducing this geographic area to a catchphrase: “Canada's poorest postal code.” The phrase became a schoolyard nickname that won't wear off.

The epithet blinds us to a holistic portrait of an historic community that epitomizes activism, ability, and creativity. As a multicultural centre of Chinese, Aboriginal, Latin American, Japanese, black,

¹ “Postal Codes in Canada,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postal_codes_in_Canada.

queer, transgender, low-income, and working-class communities, the DTES contains a deep supply of both insider and formal knowledge. These resources, along with optimism and commitment to the neighbourhood, are a source of pride. “Generally, residents live in the area because of its positive attributes: central location, affordable housing, feeling of being accepted, and sense of community. Yet the public image of the community is as ‘skid row,’ an impoverished, conflicted, and violent inner city area.”²

Despite having one of the highest per capita populations of artists in Canada, a busy calendar of festivals and fairs, a street culture of multicultural and multigenerational exchange, scores of programs and non-profit organizations designed to share life-skills, training, media literacy, and health care, and a large pool of volunteers and articulate activist residents, the DTES tends to be defined by shocking statistics. Percentages and statistics represent a reality, at least one facet of it: they become the stuff of soundbites, these tidy promulgators of our culture’s biases. Yet, in our rush to encapsulate complex information, we scarcely question the labels. Suppose we pause, as if at a crosswalk, to ask what it is we are trying to contain in a portrait of this community by reducing it to such a frame? How and where can self-definition occur?

In the ongoing conversation concerning the coding of the DTES,

2 Kathy Coyne, *Fostering Change From Within, Downtown Eastside Community Development Project Evaluation Interim Report 1999–2004* (Vancouver: Strathcona Social and Community Research Group, 2004), 15. Vancouver Coastal Health’s *The Downtown Eastside: A Neighbourhood in Recovery* “found two-fifths of the area’s 16,000 residents (6,400 people) were doing well or very well, one fifth (3,200 people) were getting by, and the rest (6,400 people) were living marginal lives and needed more support.” Of the latter group, 2,100 were “not adequately served,” research by the health board showed, which meant they had no permanent housing, behaved erratically, had significant addiction and mental illness problems, and were not linked to health care services. Nonetheless, the document referred to the neighbourhood as “one of the most capable communities in Vancouver.” Quoted in Larry Campbell, Neil Boyd, and Lori Culbert, *A Thousand Dreams: Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the Fight for Its Future* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2009), 287.

we propose that alternative representations of a spectrum of endeavours be recognized, including social justice, creative arts, and community organizing. We see this anthology as a reflection of the DTES, a choral representation that its members bring forth through a range of topics, styles, and forms. Each contributor to this anthology, at some point in his or her life, has been a member of the DTES community in some way—as an activist, resident, or employee, whether by choice or by necessity. This anthology, by people of divergent class and educational backgrounds who embrace a range of gendered, cultural, and racial identities, reflects the population that moves throughout the community on a daily basis. What interests us as editors lies not in the personal circumstances behind the writing as much as what the authors achieve in the text, each on its own terms.

We selected pieces according to their humanity and craft instead of the author's community involvement or publishing credentials. Rather than assign a theme, we encouraged contributors to show us what matters to them; no restrictions, no suggestions. Many authors instinctively focused their pieces on the area despite the open invitation to explore the world at large. Some pieces were written at a physical distance from the DTES, and not necessarily with the neighbourhood in mind; others were created when the writer was in Vancouver. The thread that unites across varying tone and discourse levels is the effect the DTES has had in shaping the writer as an artist. In some pieces this is evident; in others it is more subtle. This approach allows a common cord of association and identification with a place that continues to evolve in imaginations, as a literary concept of both "city" and "home." As editors we chose to reflect that connection by welcoming writers who continue to support and be a part of the DTES.

THURSDAYS WRITING Collective, a program founded by Elee Kraljii Gardiner with writers in the DTES, provides free, drop-in writing classes, editing help and training, and publishing opportunities for

participants. We began in 2008 as a volunteer creative writing class at Carnegie Community Centre, a hub of the DTES known for its arts initiatives and broadband resources for the population. We meet on that day of the week in the third-floor classroom to discuss writing and generate work. Meetings generally hold twenty people who range in age from eighteen to eighty-six. While everyone is welcome, preference is given to DTES residents.

For some, this is the only quiet time to write during a long week spent waiting in lines for services such as beds, meals, or healthcare. For others who have a personal practice, writing communally is a sustaining act. Thursdays Writing Collective's members have given numerous public readings and taken part in various arts events in Vancouver, allowing for cross-pollination with different literary communities. It's an innovative structure for the area in that it focuses on disseminating work with readings and publications; as of 2011 we have published five chapbook anthologies sold at bookstores, writers' festivals, and by contributors. As it has gained traction over the years, Thursdays has received support from individual donors, the Carnegie Community Centre, the City of Vancouver, and the Canada Council for the Arts. Simon Fraser University's Writer's Studio program has been a key support, providing volunteers and resources, as well as access to its popular reading series that helps us reach a larger audience.

At one of these events, John Asfour heard members of Thursdays Writing Collective read while he was in Vancouver in 2009 as the inaugural writer-in-residence at Historic Joy Kogawa House. John visited the class, and his connection with the participants led him to co-edit the second Thursdays chapbook. It was John who hatched the idea for this anthology and, although he had returned to Montreal, collaboration continued.

We sought both the unexpected and the familiar by casting a wide net for submissions via announcements on Vancouver's Co-op Radio, in handbills, newsletter ads, posterage, and word-of-mouth, as well as

postings online. In response, handwritten submissions filled the drop-box at Carnegie Community Centre’s library in the heart of the DTES, reinforcing our belief that access to technology does not have a bearing on one’s ability to produce interesting work. We discovered that by democratizing the submission process and collapsing the distance between “public,” meaning widely-published, and “private” authors, who write for a small audience or none at all, what emerged was a more comprehensive reflection of the dynamics of the community. That is the thrust of this work: to recognize a literary landscape and the many routes through it.

Several connecting themes developed, including a longing for family, acceptance, and justice, and a marked delight in discrete moments of life. In Madeleine Thien’s narrative non-fiction piece, she examines the effect of the neighbourhood on her family’s dynamic and its role in her development as a writer. John Barry’s extended prose piece uses short entries, almost like postcards, to track the arc of a life that began elsewhere in stability and passed through extreme poverty. He prods the question of origin and family, touching on the trope of connection that also surfaces in Robyn Livingstone’s poem “Compass”:

Concocted somewhere
 beyond my comprehension
 is my trust in people.
 I’m never clean entirely,
 got no house, manage hour to hour
 from day to day. I carry
 on without a compass. I’m gonna
 connect with permanence.

Connection haunts the characters in Cathleen With’s and Michael Turner’s short stories, who walk the same streets but engage with the

world in different ways: With's street kids on the level of survival, and Turner's protagonist in terms of reflecting on his relationship to his partner and his surroundings during a tumultuous time in his life.

Revisiting locales, or even the same subjects, in separate pieces of the anthology yields idiosyncratic results. A community's multiple, sometimes contradictory, responses to shared events is expected, but it is in these redoublings, these personal examinations of a shared subject, that we experience the confluence and dissonance of community. The many palimpsest moments in the DTES and in this anthology begin with the Coast Salish peoples, whose land we inhabit along the Burrard Inlet and the Salish Sea. Thousands of years' worth of footprints have worn the paths we both follow and diverge from within these pages. Just as we are affected by the sounds of our neighbours' music coming through the walls, so we pick up on the heritage of the people who have come before us. We hope the anthology captures this moment of the DTES, a place that, in order to be known or defined, must be narrated by its creators—its residents and community members.

The DTES may be one of the most written-about neighbourhoods in Canada, but how much of that writing is self-generated? How many feet of newsprint or commentary are external—and judgmental? V6A passes the pen to those who form the community so that they may guide our gaze to witness the human condition as they know it. These vivid pieces do not attempt to solve problems, rather they propose a dialogue with the reader. Writing, after all, is not just a craft, it is a survival method that begins in solitude and evolves with the promise of communication. Self-described “warrior-poet” Henry Doyle lays it bare in “Death Isn't Lonely”: “I hide in my typewriter / hoping that Death is lost tonight and / won't be banging on my hotel room door.”

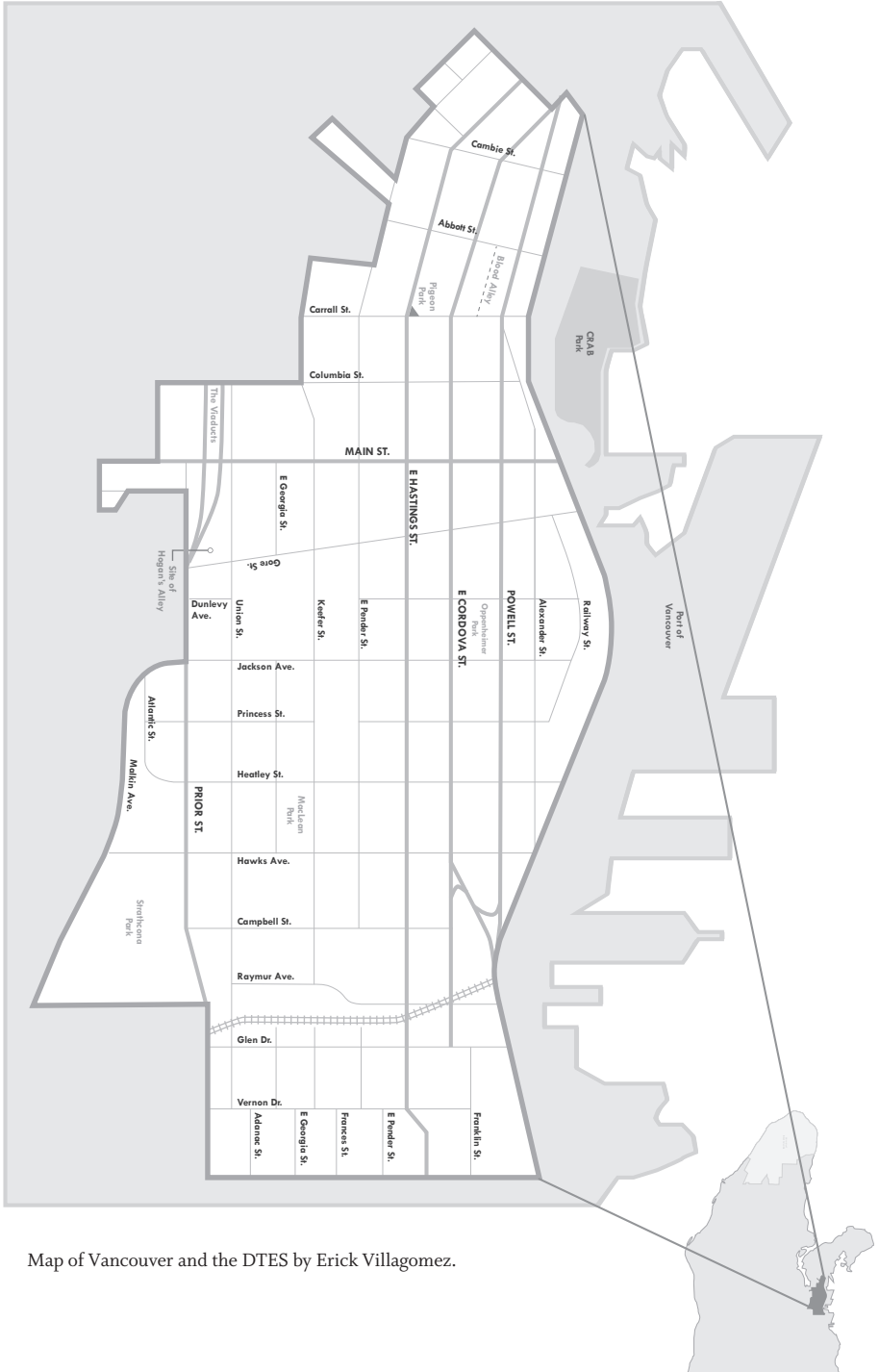
Writing and reading are powerful acts of witnessing. A text, given its effects on both writer and reader, can create a space for response and discussion of the forces shaping a community. We felt it imperative to include an attempt to understand artist Pamela Masik's controversial

paintings related to the disappearance of DTES women. (Between 1978 and 1997, sixty-nine women were missing or murdered, and little was done to solve the cases until a serial killer was identified and tried for six murders, though DNA traces of thirty-two women were found on his property.³ The current inquiry into the police mishandling of the DTES Missing and Murdered Women, which in all likelihood will continue for years, has provoked frustration and discord in the DTES community and rippled beyond its borders through the city, to northern communities and across Canada.⁴) One approach to the topic comes from contributor Don Larson in a piece of creative writing that imagines the voice of one of the women painted by Masik. Larson, a long-time activist who was key in establishing CRAB (Create a Real Affordable Beach) Park and who is attending the Missing Women's Inquiry hearings to support the women's families, is doing what he can to keep the women with us. Larson's isn't the only response possible. As members of the DTES community, we need to write about the crimes, and the injustices that allow them, while maintaining an awareness of the potential for misunderstandings. What we can do is hold a space for a variety of responses and for the discussion of the forces shaping the community, where people can share their thoughts.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD ITSELF is a place of instinct and opinion that defies categorization. Definitions of the area are mutable, changing to reflect the lives of its inhabitants and the motives of the map makers. One map suggests the limits of the DTES are Cambie Street to the west, Clark Drive to the east, the waterfront to the north, and

3 Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users: "Women in street-level sex trade are murdered at a rate of 60 to 120 times the rate of the general female population ... Aboriginal women are also over-represented among survival sex-trade workers in the DTES, an indication of the highly gendered and systemic poverty, racism, and marginalization which Aboriginal women encounter across Canada ... Seventy percent of sex-trade workers in the DTES are Aboriginal women." <http://vandu.org/groups.html>

4 Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, <http://www.missingwomeninquiry.ca>.



Map of Vancouver and the DTES by Erick Villagomez.

Venables Street/Prior Avenue to the south.⁵ Certainly, there is no hard and fast definition of the area known as the DTES that is taken up by both residents and the developers pushing to “gentrify” the area. One city hall employee explained the variance in maps to us by saying that some people “feel the neighbourhood includes this area, some don’t.” Our sense is that by-law and zoning maps reflect a different reality than maps based on the organic flow of social exchange.

The DTES, like a patchwork quilt, stitches together communities that are self-contained in some sense. How does the DTES integrate neighbourhoods within the area, such as Japantown? One could argue that the DTES extends past Terminal Street as the Downtown Eastside Residents Association suggests, because the SkyTrain station at Main and Terminal serves as a hub for residents. Following this definition of usage, perhaps the DTES ought to include the strip along the port several blocks away, the second largest in volume in North America, because of sex-trade workers’ involvement with services in the heart of the community.⁶

By all accounts, the intersection of Hastings and Main forms the nexus of the DTES. Before it was known as Hastings Street, the thoroughfare bore the name “Skid Road” because of the horse-drawn sleds that dragged lumber to the Hastings Saw Mill at the port.⁷ From its beginning as a township, the area’s population has fluctuated with the nature of the port city: the cyclical employment of loggers

5 DTES map and boundaries, http://www.ask.com/wiki/Downtown_Eastside. The Downtown Eastside Resident’s Association’s definition runs further to the south to encompass more of False Creek by extending to Great Northern Way and Second Avenue. See Denise Blake Oleksijczuk, “Haunted Spaces,” in *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 Block West Hastings*, ed. Reid Shier (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery and Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001), 115.

6 Anne Tasker for DTES Economic Development Society, *Profile of the DTES: The People and the Place* (Vancouver: Downtown Eastside Economic Development Society, 1992), 30.

7 “Skid Road” came to represent the “boisterous” environment of Vancouver beer parlours and brothels around the logging camps until it became a pejorative by the 1940s (*Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 Block West Hastings*, 13).

and cannery workers; the boom and bust of the economy. The city's largest landowner for decades, the Canadian Pacific Railway,⁸ had an enormous effect on the contours of Vancouver's physical and social maps, as did the Oppenheimer brothers,⁹ the namesakes of Oppenheimer Park at Dunlevy and East Cordova Streets, whose grocery business continues today. After the Great Fire of 1886, the first of our many tent cities, this one sanctioned by government, housed "city hall" until civic leaders rebuilt quickly with financial assistance from private businesses.

Today a handful of grand buildings endure from the 1880s, among them the Market Hall and Carnegie Library.¹⁰ Another of the city's best-loved buildings from the era that remains, the Woodward's department store at Abbott and Hastings, contributed to the infrastructure of the area as a gathering spot, an economic force, and a destination.¹¹ The department store catered to every need, selling groceries, clothing, and tools, and employing hundreds of residents until it closed in 1993. When condo development deals for the building began in 2002, squatters staged a ninety-two-day protest. The development, which promised so much in terms of social housing, is seen by residents as a wedge that drives gentrification in that area. Woodward's

8 The company drew close to 17,000 immigrants from China to work on its rails in the province. The explosion of growth went hand-in-hand with social strife including systematic prejudice; Chinese workers earned half what white workers did, and a Head Tax passed in 1885 impeded Chinese workers from bringing their families to Vancouver. By 1900, 2,100 Chinese people, some marooned here, unable to raise the funds to return home, lived in "Saltwater City" near Pender and Carrall Streets. Tom Snyders with Jennifer O'Rourke, *Namely Vancouver: A Hidden History of Vancouver Place Names* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001), 63.

9 In 1886 they owned 1,460 acres in what is now the DTES. Tasker, *Profile of the DTES*, 2.

10 Snyders, O'Rourke, *Namely Vancouver*, 187.

11 Its symbolic involvement in DTES social justice predates 1904 when owners complained to City Council about the political speakers and radicals who gathered near the store to protest low wages. Jeff Sommers and Nick Blomley, "The Worst Block in Vancouver," in *Stan Douglas: Every Building on 100 Block West Hastings*, 29.

continues to be a flash point of civic planning and social responsibility in its current inception as mixed social and market housing and the home of Simon Fraser University's School for Contemporary Arts and W2 Community Media Arts Centre.

For many decades, the DTES was the commercial heart of the city—Vancouver's first traffic light was installed in 1928 at Hastings and Main.¹² In 1958, when streetcar service to the downtown core ceased, shoppers began to patronize shopping malls outside the area, and the diminished DTES pedestrian traffic triggered a loss of commerce.¹³ During the 1960s and '70s, a province-wide decline in significant industries translated into high unemployment in the DTES. Disadvantaged and displaced residents found rental rooms by the week or month in the area's increasingly run-down hotels. These single resident occupancy rooms (SROs), ten-by-ten foot spaces with shared bathrooms and no kitchen facilities, were historically where seasonal resource workers stayed when in Vancouver. SROs became a trope of the DTES that dominates today, even before the drug market came to the neighbourhood. As of 2007, there were 5,985 SROs in the DTES, many of which are not earthquake-proof, and are largely vermin-infested, unsafe, and unclean.¹⁴ The rooms rent for more than the provincial shelter allowance, meaning that residents are forced to use their welfare cheques to cover rent. The strain placed on the neighbourhood from housing issues is multifaceted.

In the 1980s, waves of high-potency crack and cocaine infiltrated street commerce, and public opinion about the despair on the streets

12 Chuck Davis and Shirley Mooney, *Vancouver: An Illustrated Chronology* (Burlington, ON: Windsor Publications, 1986), 89.

13 DTES Revitalization Community History, <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/dtes/communityhistory.htm>.

14 Managers charge unpredictable "guest fees" for visitors, and eviction is frequently threatened and spontaneous. Services, such as running water and electricity, are interrupted or withheld; security is haphazard. Paul Raynor and Ben Johnson, *2007 Survey of Low-Income Housing in the Downtown Core* (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, General Manager of Community Services, 2007), 1.

grew confused and reactionary.¹⁵ What can best be described as the “pathologization of an entire neighbourhood”¹⁶ was occurring from outside the DTES as the public mistook the deplorable conditions of housing and other social problems for the people who experienced them. Residents recognized the discrepancy and found shelter, metaphorically and literally, in the community, referring to it as “a place you could go, where if you were different, you wouldn’t be judged.”¹⁷ In 1998, acknowledging that that drug-related problems in the DTES were not a one-cause or one-solution situation, the city began examination of the “Four Pillars” drug strategy—prevention, treatment, harm reduction, and enforcement. In 2003, North America’s first safe injection site, Insite, opened, but the discussion of the conditions and biases that reinforce municipal policy has continued to affect characterization of the DTES residents. Wayne Compton’s essay on Hogan’s Alley, previously the site of the city’s black community that was destroyed for a failed freeway plan in the 1960s, touches on the scapegoating of the residents that continues today. Compton points out elsewhere that not much has changed in the seventy years since the local newspaper first asked of the area, “If you clean it up where will all the lost, drug addicted souls and unpleasant people go?”¹⁸

APPROPRIATION OF THE neighbourhood continues, not just via high-rent projects. How do we process or understand the social changes occurring in the DTES now? Our choice is to listen to the concerns that pre-

15 “Expo 86 brought international attention to Vancouver, as well as cocaine that was 90% pure, and deadly. Overdoses surged, from 10% of fatalities in 1980 to 30% in the 1990s” (ibid). Heroin trade led to ferocious turf wars between dealers who moved into hotels and pushed their addictive drugs on users who weren’t accustomed to such potency. “By 1993 drug use had become the leading cause of death for men and women ages 30–44. Heroin was involved in 90% of these.” Campbell, Boyd, and Culbert, *A Thousand Dreams*, 43.

16 Sommers and Blomley, “The Worst Block in Vancouver,” in *Stan Douglas*, 21.

17 Campbell, Boyd, and Culbert, *A Thousand Dreams*, 39.

18 Wayne Compton, *After Canaan: Essays on Race, Writing, and Region* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010), 122.

occupy the writers who affiliate themselves with the community. One contributor, who writes under the pseudonym My Name is Scot, captures the push and pull exerted on the neighbourhood through its use as raw material for the film industry. His piece is a literary compilation of notices informing residents about the temporary colonization of streets and lots by film crews. In an emotional portrait of despair and hope, Phoenix Winter presents her neighbourhood by touching on the physical details of cherry blossoms surrounding Oppenheimer Park in her poem, “Savour the Taste.” In “High-track, Low-track,” spoken-word artist Antonette Rea explores the economic and socio-logic marginalization of transgendered sex-trade workers along the industrial waterfront.

It’s unlikely that readers will respond to every piece of writing in this collection with matched intensity. Though we have considered the placement and flow of the pieces, we encourage readers to engage with the anthology how they will. That may be by hopscotching according to whim, circling back to a favourite spot—the way one would retrace Pender Street to reach Dr Sun Yat Sen Gardens or, taking a cue from Elaine Woo’s poem “Ride Along East Hastings from the Patricia Hotel to Woodward’s,” one may read straight down the line just as the speaker of the poem bike rides down the spine of the DTES.

There is no way to pinpoint or preserve the area, and certainly this collection is not a definition of the DTES. What we can offer is a map, an experience of the community in this moment in time, as refracted in the imaginations of the writers. In “walking through” these pages we encourage you, the reader, to experience the surprises that may be encountered in the space of a block—the sublime, grotesque, and amusing—and become a part of the conversation that is occurring in and around DTES streets.

—John Mikhail Asfour and Elee Kraljii Gardiner