Space, Temporality, History: Encountering Hauntings in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside

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The relationship between present and past is the battleground on which interventions could be distinguished from repetitions.

– Ernst Van Alphen

Haunted encounters

An image of a ghost town evokes abandoned urban space, a town without life or people, a space of hauntings. In nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British Columbia, ghost towns were left standing in the wake of gold rushes as discouraged miners literally rushed to the next purported hot spot. As a child, I loved visiting one such spot, pieced together from abandoned buildings and towns to form a tourist attraction near the B.C.-Alberta border. The Three Valley Gap ghost town was a necessary stopping point on family road trips from Edmonton to Vancouver Island and was indelibly tied to my sense of what it meant to have crossed into British Columbia. From Three Valley Gap, I have some of my earliest memories of learning about the spaces of the Western frontier. In a ghost town, it is virtually impossible to escape the feeling
that one is surrounded by ghostly presences. A child with an active imagination can read the historical plaques and positively feel the presence of the ghosts of the people they tell stories about. Yet the ghosts these plaques speak of are often relatively benign: they do not tell us much of the story of the frontier at all. For in a frontier ghost town, the ghosts themselves are haunted by the pasts that their stories (or at least, the versions presented on the plaques) disavow. What might happen if such hauntings and such feelings of being surrounded by ghosts were presented not in a location and language that imply a historical past as past, but instead a historical past animated in (and for) the present?

In this paper, I transpose the traditional site of the ghost town with the space of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. I have chosen this particular space because of the research I have been doing for some time now on representations of the women who have been disappeared from this neighbourhood over the past few decades. For those who might be unfamiliar with these events, sixty-five women who lived or worked in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside are currently listed by a joint Vancouver Police Department and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Missing Women’s Task Force as “missing.” The first woman to have been disappeared from this neighbourhood, according to that task force, went missing in the late 1970s (although there is good reason to believe that many women had already been disappeared from the neighbourhood by then). Since that time, more and more women have been disappeared from the community, with a sharp increase in the numbers of women listed by police as “last seen” in the late 1990s and the very early years of the twenty-first century. For many of the women on the official list of the missing, those of us who did not know them before they were disappeared can now, in some cases, learn little more than their names and the approximate dates when they were last seen. Most of the women on the police list have friends, families, and lovers or partners who love and miss them and who noticed their disappearances almost immediately (in contrast to some initial suggestions otherwise). Many, perhaps most, of the women on the list did street-level, survival sex work at the time of their disappearances and were grappling with an addiction to drugs, which is what most of us lacking an immediate personal connection to the women first learned about them. It is also important to note that a vastly disproportionate number of them are of Indigenous ancestry. Their disappearances must therefore also be situated in relation to what the Native Women’s Association of Canada estimates to be at least 520 murdered or unaccounted for Indigenous women across the country, clustered mainly in the Western provinces. It is my argument that while the women who were disappeared from Vancouver are no longer physically there in the Downtown Eastside, they do indeed maintain a “seething presence,” to use social analyst Avery Gordon’s term, in Vancouver.
(and beyond), one that can tell us something important about the relationship between the past and the present.8

I am curious about the possibilities that might arise when such “seething presences” mess around with conventional notions of space, temporality, and history: what might encounters with hauntings be able to tell us about the past’s claims on the present, the past’s ongoing presence in the present state of things in a space such as Downtown Eastside Vancouver? In other words, encountering hauntings is in part about sorting out a way to reconfigure the linear relationship between past and present. It involves bringing the two together to sort out how they are enmeshed, thereby staging what Van Alphen, in the epigraph to this paper, describes as an “intervention” instead of a “repetition.”9

When we look to the past for lessons we can learn, we often, perhaps unwittingly, secure that past’s place as past, over and done with, or settled. When we look to the past for how it is evident in the conditions and arrangements of the present, we provide openings for haunting encounters, which in turn unsettle conventional understandings of these two concepts, past and present, as linear and separable.

Thus, the value of a haunting lies in its disruption of notions of space as containable and static, of temporality as linear, and of history as something fixed, finished, and past. When we recognize the contingency of designations of space and separations of past from present, it seems to me that it becomes impossible to claim spatial boundaries or the past’s relationship to the present as “settled” in any way. Such a realization draws us into a new way of relating to one another, of knowing ourselves to be related to one another. If we see settlement of the land now known as Vancouver (or Western Canada, for that matter) not as something that happened between Europeans and First Nations in the distant past, for example, but as an ongoing process evident in the way our spaces and identities are constituted today, then a different understanding of our relation to each other becomes necessary. It is my argument that unravelling notions of space, temporality, and history as they are conventionally understood might work to implicate a broader public in the injustices and violence experienced by many who live in the Downtown Eastside today, unsettling us at the same time that these notions themselves are shown to be far from settled. Taking counsel from Avery Gordon’s thinking on the significance of haunting encounters, I turn first in this paper to a consideration of the past’s haunting presence in the present state of things in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and will conclude with a story about my own encounter with the haunting presence of a woman named Sereena Abotsway, a woman who was an activist in the Downtown Eastside before she was disappeared in 2001 and subsequently murdered. This encounter, I will argue, aptly exposes the power of hauntings.
to unsettle conventional understandings of space, temporality, history, and the relations between them, and it might work to in turn unsettle conventional arguments about who or what is responsible for the disappearance and murder of Abotsway and other women who share her social circumstances.

Hauntings and ghost stories are somewhat unusual terrain for scholars, associated as they are with the deliberate scare tactics of commercial haunted houses and Hollywood horror films. But the conceptual framework for encountering hauntings that I develop in this paper has little to do with the term’s more conventional resonances. Instead, it is a framework for a different approach to doing academic research. As social analyst Avery Gordon explains in her book *Ghostly Matters,* such a practice could “be conceived as entering through a different door, the door of the uncanny, the door of the fragment, the door of the shocking parallel.” For Gordon, haunting describes “how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities.” Encountering hauntings is in part about a different way of approaching knowledge, a different way of understanding what knowledge is and how we might recognize it, since we are tasked with looking not for what is there but for the “seething presence” of what “appears to be not there.”

Hauntings thus offer a way of producing scholarship that requires “a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production.” This change is brought about in part, according to Gordon, by postmodernism, or more specifically by “the claims and summons poststructuralism, in particular, has made on our traditional notions of the human subject, meaning, truth, language, writing, desire, difference, power, and experience.” But Gordon does not halt her description of the shifting understanding of knowledge required for encountering hauntings at poststructuralist interventions. She is also interested in how “some feminists and critical theorists have sensibly insisted on retaining … a double structure of thought that links the epistemological and the social.” I too am committed to maintaining this “double structure” of thought, an approach to theorizing that takes seriously the epistemological challenges brought about by poststructuralism but that insists on contemplating the relations to and relevance of those challenges for contemporary social and political life.

Hauntings demand not only a different way of recognizing knowledge but also a different approach to knowledge production, and in that sense, encountering hauntings is a kind of methodological approach, although not only that. It is a way of knowing and a way of producing knowledge, one that attempts to account for significant theoretical shifts in the humanities and social sciences but one that also wants to do so in a way that situates such knowledge in rela-
tion to social life. “Could it be,” Gordon wonders, “that analyzing hauntings might lead to a more complex understanding of the generative structures and moving parts of historically embedded social formations in a way that avoids the twin pitfalls of subjectivism and positivism?” “Perhaps,” she replies. “If so, the result will not be a more tidy world, but one that might be less damaging.”

I am attracted to Gordon’s conceptualization of hauntings, to her thoughts about where following ghosts might lead, because a more complex but ultimately less damaging world seems a laudable goal to me as well.

**The West’s (present) pasts**

*That Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside is a neighbourhood of some notoriety across Canada practically goes without saying. It is frequently described as “Canada’s poorest postal code” and is certainly a community where the unjust and uneven effects of urban poverty and neglect are deeply felt. There has long been considerable interest in “cleaning up” the area among some civic officials, law enforcement officers, real-estate developers, and residents both within and beyond the neighbourhood. What exactly that process might look like and what forms it might take often remains vague and is sometimes cloaked in the more innocuous language of urban “revitalization.” Long recognized as one of the few neighbourhoods in Vancouver offering anything close to affordable housing for those on a fixed income, the Downtown Eastside is nonetheless losing low-income housing today at an alarmingly ever-greater pace in the lead-up to the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. This displacement of local residents has not escaped the notice of neighbourhood activists and is being documented in the interests of challenging civic officials’ repeated insistence that displacements due to “revitalization” of the area will not occur. According to a new report by the Carnegie Community Action Project (C-CAP), 174 rooms in single-room occupancy hotels (SROs) closed in the first few months of 2008, with another 225 rooms in imminent danger of closing.13 Meanwhile, new condominium projects with few or no commitments to social housing are being given a green light by the City despite resistance from local activists and residents.14* Clearly, the City’s zero-displacement commitment is not being met, as the thrust of development forces low-income residents either out of the neighbourhood or onto the streets. Likely at the insistence of local residents and activists, civic officials were careful not to imagine away the existing Downtown Eastside community through the design of a recent revitalization project, repeatedly emphasizing that the revitalization was intended for the benefit of the existing community, not a community of new urban middle-class “pioneers” yet to come. Nonetheless, residents of the Downtown Eastside
are today facing displacement at an alarming rate, seemingly to make room for “settlers” who will stake claims on this space that are deemed by many to be more legitimate.

It is hardly coincidental that the language and metaphors frequently invoked to describe or represent the space of the Downtown Eastside today very closely resemble those used to describe the land now known as British Columbia (and Western Canada more broadly) during efforts to resettle this space with European colonizers. As Sommers and Blomley explain, the Downtown Eastside is frequently cast today as a “mythical frontier” that is “wild, dangerous, and, ultimately, [an] empty space, ripe for (re)settlement.” The repetition or recycling of language and metaphor evident here indicates that colonization is not a finished, settled, or past project, but instead is ongoing and continually remade in the present. This insight provokes an important recontextualization of the present-day injustices and violence experienced by residents of the Downtown Eastside not as the inevitable outcome of contemporary social problems like drug use, prostitution, and crime, but instead as the outcome of encounters that repeatedly remake colonization in the present, attempting to re-enact its permanence while at the same time exposing its contingency.

The use of frontier mythology to describe the contemporary Downtown Eastside alerts us to a haunting. The resurfacing of this mythology in contemporary efforts to revitalize the Downtown Eastside is an indication that these efforts are haunted by the city’s colonial past, a past with claims on the present that are yet to be reckoned with. Frontier mythology slips into these efforts and makes this colonial past “there and not there at the same time”: “there” because the mythology evokes this past, but “not there” because the past’s significance and relevance to the present is so frequently disregarded. Instead, efforts to effect a present-day displacement of Downtown Eastside residents rely on a taken-for-granted assumption that the past is past—is settled, so to speak—in order to legitimize desires to clean up and resettle this community. But the invocation of frontier mythology provides an opening for haunting to seep out and expose how the relationship between past and present is far less linear than conventionally conveyed.

The space now designated the Downtown Eastside was of course not always demarcated in this way. In fact, it did not become known as the Downtown Eastside until around 1973, when the Downtown Eastside Residents’ Association was founded to try to change negative public and civic perceptions of the area then most commonly referred to as “skid road.” But before the city of Vancouver was incorporated as such in 1886, before the province now known as British Columbia entered into the Canadian confederation in 1871, before Vancouver Island was established as a British colony in 1849, and before
the establishment of Fort Langley in 1827 brought about regular contact between European settlers and Indigenous people, the space now known as the Downtown Eastside was travelled across, lived on, and occupied primarily by numerous Coast Salish First Nations (who of course were not known and did not come to know themselves as Coast Salish or as First Nations until the violent imposition of a colonial settler society on what is now known as the west coast of British Columbia). The people of these nations lived on these lands for centuries prior to the arrival of European colonizers. Mid-nineteenth and early–twentieth-century representations of this space, this land, as vast, empty, rugged wilderness have contributed to a social imaginary that frequently eclipses those with prior claims and ties to this space, claims and ties that were not dealt with justly but instead outright denied or suppressed through a decimation of the peoples who stood to make them.

Such is the weight of discourses that posit the colonization of British Columbia as the discovery of a vast, empty wilderness that they continue to influence the way histories of colonization are written and understood today. In his book The Resettlement of British Columbia, for example, Cole Harris reflects on the impact such discourses had on the history he was writing and publishing in a reputable academic history journal as recently as 1985. As he explains:

When I wrote that there was no evidence of Native settlement near Idaho Peak [in the British Columbia interior], I did not know about the smallpox epidemics of 1782 and 1862, or about the measles epidemic of 1848, or about influenza in 1849…. Mine is another example, from one who should have known better, of the substitution of wilderness for an erased Native world.

The organization of space and social life in contemporary British Columbia was shaped by colonial acts that aimed to effect the erasure and/or displacement of First Nations peoples and communities: Harris documents how by 1877 much of the Indigenous population of the lower mainland was sequestered on reserves. These acts continue to have a significant impact on how the space of the Downtown Eastside in particular is imagined today.

In her book On the Edge of Empire, historian Adele Perry carefully documents the turbulence and anxieties provoked by efforts to resettle the land now known as British Columbia with settlers of European descent. Prior to its entry into the Canadian confederation in 1871, British Columbia, Perry writes, “hung precariously at the edge of Britain’s literal and symbolic empire.” Colonialists were routinely frustrated and/or outraged that this outpost of empire “bore little resemblance to the orderly, respectable, white settler colony that imperial observers...
hoped it would become.”

At a time when Indigenous people still outnumbered their colonizers, when white women were scarce and mixed-race relationships (between European men and Indigenous women) commonplace, considerable effort was required to try to bring this colony in line with imperial ideals and imaginings. Such efforts would not only bring about a profound displacement and destruction of Indigenous communities but would also constitute and sanction a particular understanding of Indigenous womanhood, one that I will argue is indelibly bound to the contemporary violence directed at Indigenous women who live or work in the Downtown Eastside (and in Western Canada more broadly).

Anxieties over sexual and/or domestic relationships between European men and Indigenous women were part of the reasoning behind official policies aimed at evacuating Indigenous people from the burgeoning urban spaces of the new colony. There were many debates among governors and clergymen about the merits of officially wedding such couples. Some argued that “white men’s morality would inevitably be imperilled by connections with Aboriginal women,” while others argued that Aboriginal women should be protected from the debasement of extramarital relationships with European men. Regardless of their reasoning, Perry writes, “[a]ll shared the motivating conviction that relationships forged between white men and Aboriginal women were indicative of the failure of respectable gender and racial organization to develop on this edge of empire.”

Significant efforts were thus taken by colonial governors and by the church to prevent or disrupt such relationships.

Calls from across the colony to restrict the presence of Indigenous people in the growing cities of Victoria and New Westminster led to official and unofficial policies intended to produce this effect. In April 1861, for example,

[p]olice issued orders “to drive all Indians found in town after 6 o’clock p.m. across the bridge” that separated settler-Victoria from the Lekwammen (Songhees) reserve. Aboriginal people found on the wrong side of the racial divide after 10 p.m. were to be searched and prevented from returning until morning unless they could produce documentation of a clear and subservient relationship to the colonial community, namely “passes from white persons by whom they are employed.”

While anxieties over mixed-race relationships were not the only cause of such policies (Perry suggests that smallpox was another convenient and perhaps coincidental excuse for them), they were certainly one cause. Such determined efforts to rid urban spaces of the presence of Indigenous peoples, and of Indigenous women in particular, hauntingly—and alarmingly—foreshadow contemporary examples of similar practices.
Another technique for discouraging mixed-race relationships in the colony was to employ language and imagery that would eventually secure a near-synonymous equation of the categories of “Indigenous woman” and “prostitute.” As Perry explains, “[a] convenient shorthand for signifying the immorality of First Nations womanhood was the suggestion that Aboriginal women were, by definition, prostitutes.” This mapping became so pervasive that at the time it took “little to ‘prove’ [Aboriginal women’s] participation in the sex trade,” a belief that was in turn used as both a tool and a justification for ejecting Indigenous women from urban centres. In December 1862, for example, a Victoria city councillor “proposed a by-law ‘declaring it to be unlawful for any person to Harbor Indian women within the City limits.’” To legitimize this proposal, he insisted that “‘the squaws might all be considered as prostitutes, and that was sufficient grounds for their rejection.’” While his proposal was not successful, it suggests a generalized tendency toward this conflation of Indigenous womanhood and prostitution in colonial British Columbia.

A common reaction to Perry’s findings might be to dismiss the racist ideologies they document as belonging to a bygone era, the injustices of which we have securely put behind us in the interests of a more tolerant, pluralist, multicultural present. But Sunera Thobani’s important new research offers much evidence to the contrary. Thobani argues that Canadian nationality is built upon a notion of “exaltation.” “In the case of Canada,” she writes, “the historical exaltation of the national subject has ennobled this subject’s humanity and sanctioned the elevation of its rights over and above that of the Aboriginal and the immigrant.” The exalted subject is the national subject, and its outsiders (for Thobani, these are primarily Indigenous persons and immigrants) are cast—in law as well as in national mythology—as outside of the bounds of the human, belonging to spaces outside of the rule of law. She explains:

Racial difference, as a system of hierarchy within the Canadian socio-legal system constitutes the national, the Indian, and the immigrant as different kinds of legal beings. In the process, it also constitutes them as different kinds of human beings at a symbolic level.26

What it means to be constituted as a Canadian national is indelibly bound to what it means to be constituted as Indigenous in Canada; this, Thobani argues, is the founding distinction on which our national mythology is based, a mythology that shapes our present as much as our past.

Violent colonial encounters that constituted subjects as exalted Canadian nationals or as Indigenous outsiders to the nation are inseparably tied to divisions of space within the boundaries of what is now known as Canada.
The colonial world emerged as a world divided.” For the settler, cities, lawfulness, and wealth prevailed; for the “native,” reservations, lawlessness, and poverty. While such divisions are obviously oversimplified, the connections Thobani makes between understandings of space and subject formation are important. Not only do they suggest that whether or not someone is recognizable as human has much to do with which spaces they occupy, but, if we take her insight a step further, one could also argue that such spaces do not remain static across time; that different spaces are constituted on similar terms during different historical epochs. Thus, during early contact, the lands now known as British Columbia were described on very similar terms (as empty space awaiting “improvement”) as the Downtown Eastside repeatedly is today. The mythologies used to define particular spaces are thus trans-temporal, while such spaces, despite their refusal to remain static, are nonetheless used to contain those subjects whose humanity is, in relation to the “exalted” subject, rendered less intelligible.

I contend, then, that the kinds of mythologies and rhetorics tracked by Perry and Thobani, although frequently historical, are nonetheless certainly not past (when the past is construed as settled, finished, over and done with); instead, they shape the contours of the present of British Columbia. In fact, as already noted, some very similar symbolic and material practices are evident in the Downtown Eastside today, and it is to these symbolic and material practices of (neo)colonialism as they haunt contemporary representations of and encounters with this neighbourhood that I now turn.

An urban frontier

The contemporary Downtown Eastside has become notorious for drug use, prostitution, and extreme poverty, not just through news reportage but also in part through the immense popularity of a National Film Board of Canada (NFB) documentary titled Through a Blue Lens (1999). This film documents the lives of several people who at the time of filming were addicted to substances and living for the most part on the streets in the Downtown Eastside, as filmed (and framed) through the gaze of a group of Vancouver police officers. It constructs the Downtown Eastside along the lines of the mythical frontier that Sommers and Blomley describe: the film’s opening shots of drug deals and people smoking and injecting drugs emphasize the supposed degeneracy and lawlessness of the neighbourhood and are accompanied by steel guitar music intended, according to geographer Jennifer England (based on an interview with the film’s director, Victoria Mannix), to “give the inner city a purposeful wild-west groove.” In an interview with England, Mannix explained that her
aim was to represent the Downtown Eastside as "an untamed frontier: a place of good guys and bad guys, cowboy cops and outlaw addicts."  

Through a Blue Lens is rife with scenes evocative of the Wild West. In one scene, for example, with the steel guitar again twanging in the background, a police officer encounters a man in an alleyway, makes him dump his heroin on the ground, and then says, "'Turn your pocket inside out there, partner.'" When he is satisfied that the man has no additional drugs, the officer instructs him to "move along, partner." The music and language here are right out of a typical Western. The scene concludes with the officer's statement that Downtown Eastside residents addicted to drugs have "really tragic, pathetic, wasted lives." This construction of Downtown Eastside residents as "pathetic" and as "waste" legitimates claims that the neighbourhood ought to be "cleaned up" in the interests of (good) citizens who desire to resettle the area. The reference to "waste" echoes nineteenth-century rationales for colonizing the space that has become Vancouver; as Blomley explains, "Native lands … were deemed unimproved, and could thus be justly expropriated by those who were capable of reclaiming the ‘waste.’" Blomley also documents how contemporary developers imagine the Downtown Eastside today as terra nullius, a legal notion used to refer to empty or undeveloped land, and one that was also deployed to support European usurpation and theft of lands occupied and used by Indigenous people in the nineteenth century.

As Blomley points out, "[t]o characterize a dense, inner-city neighbourhood—containing several thousand people—as ‘empty’ seems a striking claim." Initially, I was myself confused by the tendency to conflate degeneracy with emptiness in descriptions of the contemporary Downtown Eastside; after all, a space requires contents, people and places and events, in order to be rendered "degenerate." Yet I have come to see that there is a definite connection between images and productions of the Downtown Eastside that emphasize "degeneracy" and "waste" and those that render it empty. The logic goes something like this: degeneracy = waste = nothing of value = nothing there. This kind of logic is thoroughly bound up in the modernist principles of development and progress, those taken-for-granted markers of triumph and success that are in turn thoroughly immersed in the logics of imperialism and colonialism. So the characterization of life in the Downtown Eastside as "degenerate" and as "waste" is an old frontier trick remade for a contemporary moment.

The echo of early descriptions of Indigenous people in contemporary descriptions of the residents of inner-city Western Canadian neighbourhoods such as the Downtown Eastside should make us curious about what kinds of encounters such descriptions might authorize. Blomley explains:
Characterization of the residents of the inner city as mobile and unfixed bear a striking resemblance to many representations of native people. In both cases, the effect is to force a separation between a population and the space it occupies, rendering a collective claim to this space void, even invisible.\textsuperscript{11}

Blomley argues compellingly about the relationship between property and citizenship, underscoring that the characterization of groups of people as mobile and unfixed places them outside of the category of property owner (often equated with citizen) and, by extension, outside of the realm of the social. Such descriptions are used not only to rationalize a resettlement of urban spaces but also to explain away the displacement or even disappearance of people belonging to spaces such as the Downtown Eastside, and then to legitimate an official strategy of non-response. For example, those who followed early media coverage of the belated realization that dozens of women were “missing” from the Downtown Eastside in the late 1990s will recall that the women were frequently described as “transient” and “mobile,” and thus, officials insisted, there was no reason to look for them (or else it was deemed impossible to look for them). These two claims, that a space slated for resettlement is “empty” and that the people who occupy it are “transient” and “mobile” work together, through the logic of private property, to rationalize not only displacement but also a sense that those supposedly transient and mobile lives are somehow less valuable, less recognizable as human.\textsuperscript{14}

The pervasiveness of frontier mythology in descriptions of the Downtown Eastside is also intimately tied to the violent encounters all too frequently experienced by many women who occupy that space today. Sherene Razack has analyzed how spaces of prostitution are produced as racialized spaces, asking, “[H]ow is prostitution always about race, class, and gender, even when the prostitutes are white?”\textsuperscript{35} Her analysis of the racialization of the spaces where prostitution happens is essential, I suggest, to understanding the connections between British Columbia’s colonial past and the disappearances and murders of women from the Downtown Eastside today. For it is not as though all of the women who have been murdered or gone missing from the Downtown Eastside are Indigenous; in fact, it is possible that fewer than half of them might be (although this would still mean that they are enormously overrepresented). But I would argue, building on Razack’s analysis, that a kind of metonymic slippage is also at work here. In the racialized spaces of the contemporary Western Canadian inner city—spaces that are described much as the frontier was described during early contact between Europeans and First Nations—histories of colonization, and in particular that aspect of those histories that produced an in-
delible connection between Indigenous womanhood and prostitution, work to effect a synecdochal rendering of “the prostitute” in such spaces as Indigenous, such that she is in effect produced as a racialized other even when her skin may be read as white. What a spatial analysis reveals here is how racialization is produced concomitantly through the histories that also (re)produce particular understandings of space, such that “race” signifies quite differently in different spaces and epochs. This insight can help us to understand how such histories are implicated in the encounters being analyzed in the present.

I have found it useful to consider Razack’s analysis alongside Sara Ahmed’s theorizing about the significance of encounters. Ahmed is interested in the figure of “the stranger,” in how encounters between those deemed familiar and unfamiliar (or strange) produce those subjects in the encounter. As she explains, “the encounter itself is ontologically prior to the question of ontology (the question of the being who encounters).” For Ahmed, then, our analysis should be concerned with the question of “how contemporary modes of proximity reopen prior histories of encounter.” She is interested in investigating “how colonial encounters are both determining, and yet not fully determining, of social and material existence.”36 Read alongside the histories of encounter I noted earlier between Indigenous women and European men in colonial British Columbia, it seems quite productive, not to mention alarming, to consider the violence experienced by women in the Downtown Eastside today (and in inner-city neighbourhoods cast as new urban frontiers in Western Canada more broadly)37 as encounters which reopen that history, belying its past-ness.

The return of significant numbers of Indigenous people to urban centres in the 1960s and 1970s in Western Canada created considerable anxieties, resulting in efforts to contain Indigenous urbanites within particular spaces in the city and/or to (re)expel them from urban centres. In her analysis of the murder of Pamela George, a Saulteaux woman from the Sakimay First Nation in Saskatchewan, Razack notes, for example, that George’s murderers drove her to the outskirts of Regina (another Western Canadian city), where they murdered her and abandoned her body.38 Razack locates this violent act on a continuum of similar contemporary efforts to violently expel Indigenous bodies from cities in Western Canada, such as the horrific police practice of driving Indigenous people out of the city and abandoning them there, which has been linked to the freezing deaths of several Indigenous men in recent years.39 Note the haunting parallel between these contemporary events and the historical efforts to remove Indigenous people from urban centres discussed above. Many of the women who went missing from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside were, of course, also driven out of the inner city, their remains discovered on a rural property in the suburban outskirts. The pattern has been similar in Edmonton,
where the bodies of women involved in survival sex work in the inner city have, over a period of several years, been found in fields outside of the city limits. It is the same pattern documented by journalist Warren Goulding, who writes about the murders of at least three Indigenous women whose bodies were discovered on the outskirts of Saskatoon, and the pattern is also evident in Winnipeg, where three bodies of women involved in sex work have been found near the city’s northern outskirts.40 This is precisely the kind of encounter that is authorized by the contemporary use of frontier mythology to describe the inner-city spaces where such women lived and worked; it is an unsettling example of the social and psychic legacies of a colonialism that is anything but past.

Encountering an absent presence

A WALK THROUGH THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE TODAY is likely to result in an abundance of ghost sightings if one is looking for them. There is a ghost on nearly every corner—in fact, on some corners they jostle for room. Sometimes ghosts are a “seething presence,” as Gordon describes, but at other times they are most noticeable through absence: the absence of their human forms.41 Absent presences mark the ghostly spirits that are visited and paid homage to each year during an annual Valentine’s Day march through the Downtown Eastside, when marchers pause and perform smudge ceremonies at corners where women were last seen before they were disappeared, vanished, made absent from the spaces where their ghostly presences now hold court. And ghosts have also been captured by another recent documentary film about this neighbourhood.

Nettie Wild’s documentary, Fix: The Story of an Addicted City (2002), is haunted by absent presences and by a presence now made absent—a presence now missing from the Downtown Eastside.42 The first haunting is intentional, the other accidental; both draw attention to contemporary injustices and together they show how hauntings are multi-layered, how “even those who haunt our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted too.”43 Released in 2002, Fix documents the struggles of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) to secure funding for a safe injection site in the Downtown Eastside. By drawing attention to the social and historical causes of poverty and addiction, the work of VANDU undermines the desire of the filmmakers of Through a Blue Lens to paint a picture of addiction as simply a matter of individualized bad choices. By contrast, through its focus on the social activism of VANDU, Fix explores the social dimensions of addiction, providing an opening for contemplating the relationship between past and present injustices.

The members of VANDU seem aware of the power of hauntings to provoke recognition of injustice. They attempt to deliberately animate hauntings
in their protests against funding cuts to Downtown Eastside services or refusals to fund social housing and harm reduction programs, programs that might reduce some of the vulnerability to unjust, untimely death that many people from the Downtown Eastside contend with daily. Repeatedly, they establish rows of wooden crosses in parks, in front of city hall, and on the grounds of the provincial legislature. Cloaked in spectre-masks, they take coffins to city council meetings. In doing so, they insist that public officials reckon with the dead of the Downtown Eastside, drawing important interconnections among public policy, the uneven distribution of social resources, and the untimely deaths of many of the people who share their neighbourhood. A laudable effort to animate hauntings for the purposes of creating change, there is nonetheless something about the intentionality of VANDU’s work here, about their strategic deployment of the dead, that cannot quite hail us into the sort of unsettling realizations that I have in mind, despite its importance as a form of political activism.

But Fix contains at least one other less obvious haunting, one captured on film entirely by accident. The second time I watched the film, I was suddenly struck by a face I thought I recognized among those in a Downtown Eastside park installing rows and rows of crosses for a demonstration. I puzzled over where I knew this face from, backed up the DVD, and suddenly felt stunned and disoriented as I realized why I recognized the woman: she is Sereena Abotsway, and I recognized her from her photograph on the Missing Women’s Task Force poster and others I have seen of her on websites and in the press. Sereena Abotsway is one of the women missing from the Downtown Eastside, and her remains were found on that rural property on the city’s outskirts. In life, Abotsway was an activist in the community. She participated in VANDU protests as well as in the Valentine’s Day march, where she once remembered murdered and missing women and is now one of the women whom marchers remember and mourn. The Valentine’s Day march, which has taken place annually in the Downtown Eastside since 1991, is organized by Indigenous women and functions as both a protest of the lingering effects of colonization and a memorial for the women whose lives have been taken or lost in large part due to this legacy. Now, marchers pause to remember Abotsway and perform a smudge to honour and release her spirit in front of the Portland Hotel on Hastings Street, where she was last seen.

It is, of course, not surprising that a documentary made in this neighbourhood at this time would capture the images of some of the women who have since been disappeared. Wild began filming Fix in 2000, and Abotsway was reported missing in 2001. Yet Abotsway’s presence in the film, because it is unexpected, is unsettling, all the more so because it is a moving image of a
woman whom I had only ever seen in still photographs. In the film, Abotsway is alive, and in the few seconds in which she appears, she pounds a wooden cross into the ground, her hammer hitting the top of the cross four times before the camera pans away to other activists doing the same thing. Here, Abotsway is protesting the social conditions that make her and others from the Downtown Eastside more vulnerable to unjust, untimely death. Her presence here among those whose deaths she protests and mourns indicates a double haunting: Abotsway—haunted by the deaths of friends and neighbours, possibly also enemies, or lovers, or acquaintances or strangers—has herself come to haunt, her presence, now made absent from the Downtown Eastside, a warning to pay attention to hauntings, to heed what they can tell us about the complicated enmeshment of past and present.

Abotsway’s haunting presence is unmarked in Fix: the film does not signal in any way that she has become one of the women on the list of Vancouver’s missing women. Yet after I recognized her presence in the film I could not watch the film again in the same way. Recognizing Abotsway in the film and knowing of her (coming) death is disorienting because it collapses time: here in the film, we see the living presence of a woman now murdered, whose death is now considered to be in the past, yet in the present captured by the film it is still in the future, still to come. Knowing of her (coming) death and seeing her alive in this film seems to implicate me, the viewer, in her murder, particularly when considered alongside the other hauntings that the film intentionally animates. I start to watch for other faces I might recognize, start to wonder whether others who appear in the film are still alive or have been disappeared or killed, or have experienced another form of unjust, untimely death. Abotsway’s haunting presence provokes a sense of urgency about the ways that injustice and vulnerability continue to be so unevenly distributed and lived.

When I visited Vancouver recently, I sat for a long time across the street from the Portland Hotel, where Abotsway was last seen. Although I have walked, biked, taken the bus, or driven past this spot literally thousands of times in my life and have at times participated in neighbourhood rallies, forums, festivals, and marches, I have seldom stopped and just sat here, on Hastings Street in the heart of the Downtown Eastside. It is not a particularly comfortable spot for me to sit; everything, from my MEC rain jacket to my designer glasses to the hue of my skin, marks me as a likely outsider in this neighbourhood, even though this demarcation of inside and outside is shifting, fluid, more porous than usually represented. But on this day, I sat for a while and contemplated Abotsway’s absent presence from where she was disappeared. For me, what lives on from her death is a building awareness that everything about who I believe myself to be and how I live my life is indelibly bound up in the injustices
that are everywhere evident in this neighbourhood. This does not mean that I can, or want to, collapse the vast differences between myself and Abotsway, or myself and many of the people who today call this neighbourhood home. To do so would be to erase the evidence of colonialism in the present, of the many ways that the past’s presence in the present left Abotsway so much more vulnerable to the violence she experienced and found her living with so much more exposure to precarity in her daily life. Still, unravelling the complicated binding of our existence is what I inherit from Abotsway and others from the Downtown Eastside whose unjust deaths continue to haunt. Attention to the haunting presences of Abotsway and others like her provokes me to begin to imagine a present (and future) that might be otherwise, or, to return once again to the epigraph from Van Alphen, to create openings for staging “interventions” instead of “repetitions,” in the interests of a (future) present in which the presence of the past is a provocation for reckonings instead of disavowals.

Notes
1 For ongoing conversations that inform and support my writing and research, I am especially grateful to Kara Granzow, Daphne Read, and Sharon Rosenberg. Any shortcomings in this essay, however, are all my own.


3 I have been conducting this research for my doctoral dissertation, Hauntings: Representations of Vancouver’s Disappeared Women, Department of English and Film Studies, University of Alberta, 2009.

4 For example, the deaths of at least ten women going back as far as 1965 have been connected to a man named Gilbert Paul Jordan, although he was convicted of manslaughter in only one of the women’s deaths. These women’s deaths suggest that the heightened vulnerability of women, and particularly of Indigenous women (all of Gilbert’s presumed victims were Indigenous), extends beyond the timeframe designated by the police task force, and I will also go on to argue that it likely extends back much, much further still.

5 See, for example, Maggie de Vries’ memoir, Missing Sarah: A Vancouver Woman Remembers Her Vanished Sister (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2003).

6 There is much debate about how many of the women are Indigenous, but even conservative estimates suggest that at least a third are of Indigenous ancestry. When considered alongside the fact that Indigenous women make up only 1.9 percent of the total population of females in Vancouver (see Statistics Canada’s 2006 Aboriginal Peoples Highlight Tables), it becomes obvious that their numbers here among the women disappeared from the Downtown Eastside are vastly disproportionate to their representation in the overall population.
7 See the Native Women’s Association of Canada’s “Sisters in Spirit National Statistics Backgrounder—October 2008,” available online at http://www.nwac-hq.org/en/documents/SISStatsOct2008FINALv1.pdf. According to this document, 78 percent of the women whose province of residence was known at the time of their disappearance or murder resided in one of the four Western provinces.


9 Ernst Van Alphen, “Colonialism as Historical Trauma,” 279.


11 Ibid., 7, 9–10, 11.

12 Ibid., 19.


15 Ernst Van Alphen, “Colonialism as Historical Trauma,” 279.


19 See Nicholas Blomley, *Unsettling the City: Urban Land and the Politics of Property* (London: Routledge, 2004), 117, 123; and Harris, *Resettlement,* xvi, 194, for discussion of representations of the West as empty space.

20 For a compelling critique of further examples of such histories, see Blomley, *Unsettling the City,* 117.

21 Harris, *Resettlement,* xvi.


23 Ibid., 107, 97.

24 Ibid., 113.

25 Ibid., 54, 110, 119.

The title of this section references Neil Smith’s important study, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996). Smith’s research on the connections between frontier mythology and inner-city gentrification in North American cities has contributed many important insights to my own reflections on Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, and I was fortunate to benefit from conversations with Smith while writing an early draft of this chapter.


The claim also legitimizes a form of “anything goes” Wild West policing intended to “bring order” to a presumably disorderly space. The overwhelming documentation of extensive police brutality in the Downtown Eastside lends support to the idea that this sort of mentality is at play in policing of the area. See the report by Pivot Legal Society, *To Serve and Protect: A Report on Policing in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside*, available online at http://www.pivotlegal.org/Publications/reportstsap.htm.

See Blomley, *Unsettling the City*, 116; see also Perry, *On the Edge of Empire*, 126.

Blomley, *Unsettling the City*, 91.

Ibid., xx.

See Blomley, *Unsettling the City*, for more on the effects of the logic of private property.


For an examination of how similar casting was deployed to support the gentrification of an inner-city neighbourhood in Edmonton, another Western Canadian city, see Kara Granzow and Amber Dean, “Revanchism in the Canadian West: Gentrification and Resettlement in a Prairie City,” *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 18 (Fall 2007): 89–106.


It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on these heinous acts of police violence, but interested readers should consult Susanne Reber and Robert Renaud, *Starlight Tour: The Last, Lonely Night of Neil Stonechild* (Random House, 2003).


42 Fix: The Story of an Addicted City, DVD, directed by Nettie Wild (Vancouver: Canada Wild Productions, 2002).

43 Gordon, Ghostly Matters, 5.


45 In his coverage of the 2007 Valentine’s Day march, published on 15 February 2007, Doug Ward from the Vancouver Sun documents Abotsway’s participation in the Valentine’s Day march in 2000, a year and a half before she was disappeared. It is quite likely that Abotsway participated in the march in many other years as well.